
Judge Orders Crescent City Harbor District to Produce Legible Text Messages in CPRA Case

By Linda Sutter August 20, 2026

Court Calls Harbor District's Production an "Over the Top Data Dump" and Orders Texts Produced in a Form the Average Citizen Can Understand

August 13, 2026

By Linda Sutter

A Del Norte County Superior Court judge has ordered the Crescent City Harbor District to provide legible copies of text messages sought under the California Public Records Act after sharply criticizing the manner in which the District produced the records.

In *Sutter v. Crescent City Harbor District*, Case No.

CV25-1022, the Honorable Judge Darren McElfresh issued a ruling addressing the District's production of text-message information in response to my public records request.

Instead of producing the requested communications in an ordinary, readable text-message format, the District provided pages of metadata and technical information.

Judge McElfresh was not persuaded that this satisfied the purpose of California's public records law.

"The above text message release appears to contradict the spirit of the CPRA and Government Code 7920.000, et. al.," McElfresh wrote. The Court noted an important practical reality: District officials do not read their text messages in the technical format that was provided to the requester.

As Judge McElfresh explained, District agents using text messages do not see them on their phones in the format that was disclosed, nor does the District actually maintain the requested texts in that format.

The District argued that the documents had been disclosed in the manner in which the information was stored. The Court rejected the practical result of that argument.

"The problem here is that the District does not store or keep the wanted texts in any fashion," McElfresh wrote. "Ergo, the request by Plaintiff for legible texts is just as reasonable as any other."

Then came perhaps the most striking portion of the ruling.

“Instead, the District released what appears as an over the top data dump that is not legible nor understandable,” McElfresh wrote, adding that understanding it would seemingly require “a degree in computer coding and decoding ‘text’ messages.”

The Court continued:

“Most of the documents are gibberish and difficult to follow at best. Why the District chose to release the texts in such a format is perplexing.”

The Court Orders the District to Produce Readable Records

Judge McElfresh ultimately ordered extraordinary judicial relief—a peremptory writ of mandate requiring the Harbor District to produce the records in an understandable form.

The Court ordered:

“Let a peremptory writ of mandate issue, commanding respondent to provide a legible copy of the texts that an average citizen can understand, follow, and comprehend; i.e., who sent and received the texts, their actual content, and when they were sent.”

The Court dismissed the sanctions action.

For members of the public who have struggled to obtain understandable public records, the significance of the ruling is simple: producing pages of technical information is not necessarily the same thing as meaningfully providing the public record that was requested.

And there is an irony in the timing.

During the August 12, 2026 Harbor District meeting—just one day before I received the Court's ruling—Harbormaster Mike Rademaker publicly characterized cases I had brought before the Board as being “out in left field” and lacking merit.

The following day, I received a Superior Court ruling ordering the District to produce the very records at issue in CV25-1022 in a legible and understandable form.

Rademaker has represented that he has paralegal experience.

I have not been provided documentation establishing his paralegal credentials. Regardless of his background, this ruling should serve as an important reminder to the elected Harbor Commissioners: legal conclusions and assurances from staff should never substitute for independent judgment, competent legal advice, and compliance with California's transparency laws.

Board members have an independent responsibility to the public they were elected to serve.

For months, this case was about something remarkably basic: when a citizen requests public text messages, the government should not respond with pages of incomprehensible technical data that the ordinary citizen cannot decipher.

Judge McElfresh has now ordered the Crescent City Harbor District to provide a legible copy showing who sent the texts, who received them, what the texts actually said, and when they were sent.

That is what was requested in the first place.

The District may have considered this case “out in left field.”

The Superior Court apparently found otherwise.

And this time, the Court's order speaks for itself.

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Printed October 30, 2026 · © Del Norte Triplicate