



Office of the Attorney General
State of Texas

DAN MORALES
ATTORNEY GENERAL

December 8, 1997

Ms. Jennifer D. Soldano
Associate General Counsel
Texas Department of Transportation
Dewitt C. Greer State Highway Building
125 East 11th Street
Austin, Texas 78701-2483

OR97-2674

Dear Ms. Soldano:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 110685.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for documents concerning a motor vehicle/pedestrian fatality accident involving personnel, vehicles and property of the department. The accident occurred on August 1, 1996 in Carrollton, Texas on Interstate Highway 35, .4 mile south of West Trinity Mills Road, being Loc. Number 6086970. Additionally, a notice of claim involving the same incident was submitted to the department which you also submit to this office. You claim that the requested information is excepted from required public disclosure by section 552.103 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and have reviewed the documents at issue.

When asserting section 552.103(a), a governmental body must establish that the requested information relates to pending or reasonably anticipated litigation.¹ Thus, under

¹552.103(a) excepts from required public disclosure information:

(1) relating to litigation of a civil or criminal nature or settlement negotiations, to which the state or a political subdivision is or may be a party or to which an officer or employee of the state or a political subdivision, as a consequence of the person's office or employment, is or may be a party; and

section 552.103(a) a governmental body's burden is two-pronged. The governmental body must establish that (1) litigation is either pending or reasonably anticipated, and that (2) the requested information relates to that litigation. *See Heard v. Houston Post Co.*, 684 S.W.2d 210, 212 (Tex. App.--Houston [1st Dist.] 1984, writ ref'd n.r.e.); Open Records Decision No. 551 (1990) at 4.

To establish that litigation is reasonably anticipated, a governmental body must provide this office "concrete evidence showing that the claim that litigation may ensue is more than mere conjecture." Open Records Decision No. 452 (1986) at 4. Concrete evidence to support a claim that litigation is reasonably anticipated may include, for example, the governmental body's receipt of a letter containing a specific threat to sue the governmental body from an attorney for a potential opposing party. Open Records Decision No. 555 (1990); *see* Open Records Decision No. 518 (1989) at 5 (litigation must be "realistically contemplated"). On the other hand, this office has determined that if an individual publicly threatens to bring suit against a governmental body, but does not actually take objective steps toward filing suit, litigation is not reasonably anticipated. *See* Open Records Decision No. 331 (1982). Nor does the mere fact that an individual hires an attorney and alleges damages serve to establish that litigation is reasonably anticipated. Open Records Decision No. 361 (1983) at 2. Whether litigation is reasonably anticipated must be determined on a case-by-case basis. Open Records Decision No. 452 (1986) at 4.

In this instance, one of the allegedly injured parties has hired an attorney who has sent a letter outlining specific facts and damages to both real and personal property. The attorneys for the estate of the deceased also submitted a request for any and all investigative documents in the instant accident. After examining your arguments and the submitted materials, we believe that you have established that litigation is reasonably anticipated and that the requested documents relate to the anticipated litigation. Therefore, you may withhold the requested information under section 552.103.

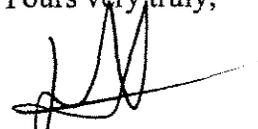
Generally, however, once information has been obtained by all parties to the litigation through discovery or otherwise, no section 552.103(a) interest exists with respect to that information. Open Records Decision Nos. 349 (1982), 320 (1982). Thus, information that has either been obtained from or provided to the opposing party in the anticipated litigation is not excepted from disclosure under section 552.103(a), and it must be disclosed. Further, the applicability of section 552.103(a) ends once the litigation has been concluded. Attorney General Opinion MW-575 (1982); Open Records Decision No. 350 (1982).

We are resolving this matter with an informal letter ruling rather than with a published open records decision. This ruling is limited to the particular records at issue under the facts presented to us in this request and should not be relied upon as a previous

(2) that the attorney general or the attorney of the political subdivision has determined should be withheld from public inspection.

determination regarding any other records. If you have questions about this ruling, please contact our office.

Yours very truly,



Janet I. Monteros
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JIM/alg

Ref: ID# 110685

Enclosures: Submitted documents

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