



April 20, 2000

Ms. Janice Marie Wilson
Associate General Counsel
Texas Department of Transportation
125 E. 11th Street
Austin, Texas 78701-2483

OR2000-1560

Dear Ms. Wilson:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 136012.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the “department”) received two requests for information relating to an auto accident on March 13, 2000 on Interstate 45. In the first request, the requestor asked for any and all documents produced by any department employee regarding the auto accident. The second requestor asked for all documents, videotapes, audiotapes, photographs, measurements, diagrams, investigation notes, and all other material relating to the auto accident. You assert that you will release most of the requested information including a construction status report, plans for highway improvement, and an accident report. You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.107 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Section 552.107(1) excepts information that an attorney of a political subdivision cannot disclose because of a duty to his client. In Open Records Decision No. 574 (1990), this office concluded that section 552.107 excepts from public disclosure only “privileged information,” that is, information that reflects either confidential communications from the client to the attorney or the attorney’s legal advice or opinions; it does not apply to all client information held by a governmental body’s attorney. Open Records Decision No. 574 at 5 (1990). A “confidential communication” is a communication “not intended to be disclosed to third persons other than those to whom disclosure is made in furtherance of the

rendition of professional legal services to the client or those reasonably necessary for the transmission of the communication.” Tex. R. Evid. 503(a)(5).

You assert that employees of the department investigated and collected the submitted information for transmission to the attorneys in the Transportation Division of this office for the purpose of obtaining legal advice. However, you do not assert that any of the submitted information was actually communicated to an attorney for the department. Based on your representations and our review of the submitted information, we conclude that the information does not reflect a confidential communication from client to attorney. Therefore, you may not withhold the information under section 552.107(1).

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov’t Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body’s intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general’s Open Government Hotline, toll free, at 877/673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ).

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Bialek
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JHB/ch

Ref: ID# 136012

Encl. Submitted documents

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