



November 2, 2001

Mr. Anthony S. Corbett
Winstead, Sechrest & Minick, P.C.
100 Congress Avenue, Suite 800
Austin, Texas 78701

OR2001-5041

Dear Mr. Corbett:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 154314.

The Brushy Creek Municipal District (the "district"), which you represent, received a request for a particular report concerning water wells. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.103 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

You explain that the requestor made a request on August 15, 2001, for the opportunity to inspect a report "concerning the water wells." On August 23, 2001, the district notified the requestor that it was unable to determine which report he was referring to and asked the requestor to clarify his request. *See* Gov't Code § 552.222 (providing that a governmental body may ask the requestor to clarify the request if what information is requested is unclear to the governmental body). Thus, the ten day time period to request a decision under section 552.301(b) was tolled on August 23, 2001. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(b); Open Records Decision No. 663 at 5 (1999) (providing that ten-day period is tolled during the clarification process). The district received the requestor's clarification on August 27, 2001, and has requested a decision from this office in accordance with section 552.301 of the Government Code. Accordingly, we will address your asserted exception.

We note that the submitted information includes completed reports, which we have marked, that normally must be released pursuant to section 552.022(a)(1) of the Government Code. Section 552.022 makes "a completed report, audit, evaluation, or investigation made of, for, or by a governmental body" public information unless expressly made confidential under other law or "except as provided by [s]ection 552.108[.]" Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(1). Section 552.103 is a discretionary exception under the Public Information Act and is, therefore, not "other law" that makes the completed reports confidential. *See* Open Records Decision No. 551 (1990) (statutory predecessor to section 552.103 serves only to protect a

governmental body's position in litigation and does not itself make information confidential). Therefore, you may not withhold the completed reports from disclosure under section 552.103 of the Government Code. As you raise no other exception to the disclosure of the submitted information, the completed reports must be released to the requestor.

We now address your claim under section 552.103 with respect to the remaining information. Section 552.103 provides as follows:

(a) Information is excepted from [required public disclosure] if it is information relating to litigation of a civil or criminal nature 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.

....

(c) Information relating to litigation involving a governmental body or an officer or employee of a governmental body is excepted from disclosure under Subsection (a) only if the litigation is pending or reasonably anticipated on the date that the requestor applies to the officer for public information for access to or duplication of the information.

Gov't Code § 552.103(a), (c). Section 552.103 was intended to prevent the use of the Act as a method of avoiding the rules of discovery in litigation. Attorney General Opinion JM-048 at 4 (1989). The litigation exception enables a governmental body to protect its position in litigation by requiring information related to the litigation to be obtained through discovery. Open Records Decision No. 551 at 3 (1990). To show that the litigation exception is applicable, the district must demonstrate that (1) litigation was pending or reasonably anticipated at the time of the request and (2) the information at issue is related to that litigation. See Gov't Code § 552.103(a), (c); see also *University of Tex. Law Sch. v. Texas Legal Found.*, 958 S.W.2d 479, 481 (Tex. App.--Austin 1997, no pet.); *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 at 4 (1990).

You state that "the [d]istrict has been sued by numerous plaintiffs as a result of a sewage spill into Brushy Creek on July 14, 1998." You inform this office that "[t]he [d]istrict retained ERM Southwest to perform a hydrogeologic and epidemiologic investigation to assess whether the wastewater overflow affected the [d]istrict's well" and that the requested report sets forth the preliminary findings with respect to this question. Based on your representations and our review of the submitted information, we conclude that you have made the requisite showing that the submitted report relates to litigation that was pending on the day that the request was received. Therefore, with the exception of the information that is subject to section 552.022, the district may withhold the submitted information under section 552.103.

We note, however, that 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 parties in all the pending lawsuits 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).

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 Dept. of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.--Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the General Services Commission at 512/475-2497.

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,



Karen A. Eckerle
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

KAE/sdk

Ref: ID# 154314

Enc: Submitted documents

c: Mr. John C. McLemore
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Austin, Texas 78717
(w/o enclosures)