OFFICE *of the* ATTORNEY GENERAL
GREG ABBOTT

April 7, 2003

Mr. Brad Norton
Assistant City Attorney
Law Department
City of Austin
P.O. Box 1546
Austin, Texas 78767-1546

OR2003-2324

Dear Ms. Nelson:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 178944.

The City of Austin Police Department (the "department") received a request for the information contained in the personnel files or records of three named police officers. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." Section 552.101 excepts from disclosure information deemed confidential by statute, such as section 143.089 of the Local Government Code. Section 143.089 provides in pertinent part:

> (a) The director [of the fire fighters' and police officers' civil service] or the director's designee shall maintain a personnel file on each fire fighter and police officer. The personnel file must contain any letter, memorandum, or document relating to:

> (1) a commendation, congratulation, or honor bestowed on the fire fighter or police officer by a member of the public or by the employing department for an action, duty, or activity that relates to the person's official duties;
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> (2) any misconduct by the fire fighter or the police officer if the letter, memorandum, or document is from the employing department and if the misconduct resulted in disciplinary action by the employing department in accordance with this chapter; and
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> (3) the periodic evaluation of the fire fighter or police officer by a supervisor.
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> . . . .
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> (f) The director or the director's designee may not release any information contained in a fire fighter's or police officer's personnel file without first obtaining the person's written permission, unless the release of the information is required by law.
>
> (g) A fire or police department may maintain a personnel file on a fire fighter or police officer employed by the department for the department's use, but the department may not release any information contained in the department file to any agency or person requesting information relating to a fire fighter or police officer. The department shall refer to the director or the director's designee a person or agency that requests information that is maintained in the fire fighter's or police officer's personnel file.

Section 143.089 contemplates two different types of personnel files, a file that must be maintained by the city's civil service director or his designee and another file that may be maintained by the city's police department for its own use. Local Gov't Code § 143.089(a), (g). Section 143.089(a) specifies certain types of information that must be contained in the civil service file; such records are not made confidential under section 143.089 and thus are subject to release unless an exception to required public disclosure applies. *See* Local Gov't Code § 143.089(f); Open Records Decision No. 562 at 6 (1990). However, information maintained in a police department's personnel file pursuant to section 143.089(g) is confidential and must not be released. *City of San Antonio v. Tex. Attorney Gen.*, 851 S.W.2d 946, 949 (Tex. App.—Austin 1993, writ denied).

You state that the submitted information is maintained in the departmental personnel file of each named officer pursuant to section 143.089(g). Based on the department's assertion that the submitted information is maintained in the department's personnel files, we find that the

submitted information is confidential pursuant to section 143.089(g) of the Local Government Code and must be withheld under section 552.101 of the Government Code.[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 Dep't of Pub. 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

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[1]We note that the submitted information contains documents that are required to be placed in the civil service commission's personnel file under section 143.089(a) of the Local Government Code. Furthermore, section 143.089(g) requires a police department that receives a request for information maintained in a file under section 143.089(g) to refer that person to the civil service director or the director's designee. You state that you have referred the requestor to the city civil service director.

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 Texas Building and Procurement 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. We note that a third party may challenge this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. 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,

Heather Pendleton Ross
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

HPR/sdk

Ref: ID# 178944

Enc: Submitted documents

c: Mr. Grant Goodwin
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(w/o enclosures)