OFFICE *of the* ATTORNEY GENERAL
GREG ABBOTT

October 7, 2003

Ms. Michele Austin
Assistant City Attorney
City of Houston
P.O. Box 1562
Houston, Texas 77251-1562

OR2003-7082

Dear Ms. Austin:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 188929.

The City of Houston (the "city") received a request for a specific investigation file. You argue that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.108 and 552.130 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

You assert that the requested information was expunged by court order, and is therefore confidential under section 552.101 of the Government Code. Section 552.101 excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." This section encompasses information protected by other statutes, including article 55.03 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. Article 55.03 prescribes the effect of an expunction order and provides:

> When the order of expunction is final:
>
> > (1) the release, dissemination, or use of the expunged records and files for any purpose other than a purpose described by Section 411.083(a) or (b)(1), (2), or (3), Government Code, is prohibited;

> (2) except as provided in Subdivision 3 of the article, the person arrested may deny the occurrence of the arrest and the existence of the expunction order; and
>
> (3) the person arrested or any other person, when questioned under oath in a criminal proceeding about an arrest for which the records have been expunged, may state only that the matter in question has been expunged.

Act of May 31, 2003, 78th Leg., R.S., ch. 1236, 2003 Tex. Sess. Law Serv. 3500 (Vernon) (to be codified as an amendment to Code Crim. Proc. art. 55.03). You inform us that the requested information was the subject of "an order of expungement of record [that] was signed by the Judge of the Harris County Criminal Court at Law #12." Based on this representation, we find that the requested information is confidential under article 55.03 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. Because the information is confidential under article 55.03, it must be withheld pursuant to 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

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[1]Because we find section 552.101 dispositive, we decline to address your arguments under sections 552.108 and 552.130 of the Government Code.

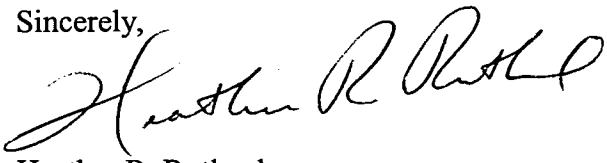
should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

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 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 R. Rutland
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

HRR/sdk

Ref: ID# 188929

Enc: Submitted documents

c: Ms. Amy C. Klam
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Houston, Texas 77057
(w/o enclosures)