ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

November 4, 2003

Ms. Joanne Wright
Associate General Counsel
Texas Department of Transportation
125 East 11th Street
Austin, Texas 78701-2483

OR2003-7922

Dear Ms. Wright:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 190418.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for the department's list of high accident locations, prepared in accordance with the Hazard Elimination Program pursuant to section 152 of title 23 of the United States Code. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.111 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

We begin by noting that the submitted information is made expressly public under section 552.022 of the Government Code. This section provides several categories of information that are not excepted from required disclosure unless they "are expressly confidential under other law." This section provides in pertinent part:

> (a) Without limiting the amount or kind of information that is public information under this chapter, the following categories of information are public information and not excepted from required disclosure under this chapter unless they are expressly confidential under other law:

> (1) a completed report, audit, evaluation, or investigation made of, for, or by a governmental body, except as provided by Section 552.108[.]

The submitted information is a completed report, which is expressly public under section 552.022(a)(1). Therefore, the department may only withhold this information if it is excepted under section 552.108 or confidential under other law.[1] Although you argue that the submitted information is excepted under section 552.111 of the Government Code, section 552.111 is a discretionary exception and therefore is not "other law" for purposes of section 552.022.[2]

You also contend that this information is confidential under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. Section 409 provides as follows:

> Notwithstanding any other provision of law, reports, surveys, schedules, lists, or data compiled or collected for the purpose of identifying [sic] evaluating, or planning the safety enhancement of potential accident sites, hazardous roadway conditions, or railway-highway crossings, pursuant to sections 130, 144, and 152 of this title or for the purpose of developing any highway safety construction improvement project which may be implemented utilizing Federal-aid highway funds shall not be subject to discovery or admitted into evidence in a Federal or State court proceeding or considered for other purposes in any action for damages arising from any occurrence at a location mentioned or addressed in such reports, surveys, schedules, lists, or data.

Federal courts have determined that section 409 excludes from evidence data compiled for purposes of highway and railroad crossing safety enhancement and construction for which a state receives federal funding, in order to facilitate candor in administrative evaluations of highway safety hazards and to prevent federally-required record-keeping from being used for purposes of private litigation. *See Harrison v. Burlington N. R.R. Co.*, 965 F.2d 155, 160 (7th Cir. 1992); *Robertson v. Union Pac. R.R. Co.*, 954 F.2d 1433, 1435 (8th Cir. 1992). We agree that section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code is other law for purposes of

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[1]The department does not raise section 552.108 as an exception to disclosure.

[2] Discretionary exceptions are intended to protect only the interests of the governmental body, as distinct from exceptions which are intended to protect information deemed confidential by law or the interests of third parties. *See* Open Records Decision No. 473 (1987) (governmental body may waive section 552.111); *see also* Open Records Decision Nos. 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (governmental body may waive litigation exception, section 552.103), 630 at 4 (1994) (governmental body may waive attorney-client privilege, section 552.107(1)), 592 at 8 (1991) (governmental body may waive section 552.104, information relating to competition or bidding), 549 at 6 (1990) (governmental body may waive informer's privilege), 522 at 4 (1989) (discretionary exceptions in general). Discretionary exceptions therefore do not constitute "other law" that makes information confidential.

section 552.022(a) of the Government Code. *See In re City of Georgetown*, 53 S.W.3d 328 (Tex. 2001); *see also Pierce County v. Guillen*, 123 S.Ct. 720 (2003) (upholding constitutionality of section 409, relied upon by county in denying request under state's Public Disclosure Act).

You state that the locations described in the submitted information are eligible for federal funds under the Hazard Elimination Program pursuant to section 152 of title 23 of the United States Code, and thus are related to federal-aid highways withing the meaning of section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. You further state that the locations at issue relate to highways that are part of the National Highway System under section 103 of title 23 and are therefore federal-aid highways within the meaning of section 409. You assert that section 409 of title 23 would protect the submitted information from discovery in civil litigation. Therefore, after reviewing your arguments and the submitted documents, we determine that the department must withhold the submitted information under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code.

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 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,

David R. Saldivar
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

DRS/seg

Ref: ID# 190418

Enc: Submitted documents

c: Mr. Dean T. Johnson
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(w/o enclosures)