



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

December 29, 2004

Ms. Jennifer Soldano
Associate General Counsel
Texas Department of Transportation
125 East 11th Street
Austin, Texas 78701

OR2004-10913

Dear Ms. Soldano:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 215756.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department ") received a request for information regarding motor vehicle collisions, traffic or accident studies, and proposals and plans related to a specified construction project, which includes the intersection of U.S. Highway 96 and Loop 500. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101 and 552.111 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.¹

Initially, we note that the submitted information contains ST-3 accident report forms governed by chapter 550 of the Transportation Code. *See* Transp. Code § 550.064 (officer's accident report). Section 550.065(b) states that except as provided by subsection (c), accident reports are privileged and confidential. Section 550.065(c)(4) provides for the release of accident reports to a person who provides two of the following three pieces of information: (1) date of the accident; (2) name of any person involved in the accident; and

¹We assume that the "representative sample" of records submitted to this office is truly representative of the requested records as a whole. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 499 (1988), 497 (1988). This open records letter does not reach, and therefore does not authorize the withholding of, any other requested records to the extent that those records contain substantially different types of information than that submitted to this office.

(3) specific location of the accident. Transp. Code § 550.065(c)(4). Under this provision, the Department of Public Safety or another governmental entity is required to release a copy of an accident report to a person who provides the agency with two or more pieces of information specified by the statute. *Id.* In this instance, the requestor did not provide the department with two of the three requisite pieces of information. Therefore, the department must withhold the submitted ST-3 accident reports in their entirety in accordance with section 550.065(c)(4) of the Transportation Code.

Next, we note that a portion of the remaining submitted information is made expressly public under section 552.022 of the Government Code. Section 552.022 provides, in relevant 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[.]

....

(5) all working papers, research material, and information used to estimate the need for or expenditure of public funds or taxes by a governmental body, on completion of the estimate[.]

Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(1), (5). Some of the remaining submitted information is expressly public under subsections 552.022(a)(1) and 552.022(a)(5). Therefore, you may only withhold this information if it is confidential under other law. 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, however, that the submitted information is confidential under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. Section 409 provides as follows:

²Discretionary 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, e.g.,* Open Records Decision Nos. 473 (1987) (governmental body may waive section 552.111), 522 at 4 (1989) (discretionary exceptions in general). Discretionary exceptions, therefore, do not constitute "other law" that makes information confidential.

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.

23 U.S.C. § 409. 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 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 inform us that “[b]ridges, including bridges not located on the National Highway System or the state highway system, are always eligible for federal aid under 23 U.S.C. § 144 and therefore are federal-aid highways within the meaning of 23 U.S.C. § 409.” You also inform us that “US 96 is part of the National Highway System under 23 U.S.C. § 103 and therefore is a federal-aid highway within the meaning of 23 U.S.C. § 409.” Therefore, we conclude that the department must withhold the section 552.022 information pursuant to section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code.

We will now consider your section 552.111 claim with regards to the remaining submitted information, including the submitted videotape. Section 552.111 excepts from disclosure “an interagency or intraagency memorandum or letter that would not be available by law to a party in litigation with the agency.” You contend that the remaining information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.111 because it would be privileged from discovery under section 409 of title 23. Upon review, we find that the remaining information constitutes intraagency memoranda for purposes of section 552.111 of the Government Code. Furthermore, we find that section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code would protect the remaining information from discovery in civil litigation. Therefore, we conclude that the remaining information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.111 and may be withheld by the department.

In summary, the department must withhold 1) the submitted ST-3 accident reports in accordance with section 550.065(c)(4) of the Transportation Code and 2) the submitted information that is subject to section 552.022 under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. The department may withhold the remaining information under section 552.111.

You also request that this office issue a previous determination allowing the department to withhold master accident lists. We decline to issue such a previous determination at this time. Therefore, this letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us. 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).

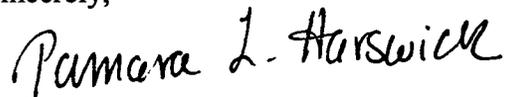
If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Dep't of Pub. Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ).

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,



Tamara L. Harswick
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

TLH/sdk

Ref: ID# 215756

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Mr. J. Randall Livingston
The Livingston Law Firm LLP
7800 San Felipe, Suite 111
Houston, Texas 77063
(w/o enclosures)