ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

February 10, 2005

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

OR2005-01235

Dear Ms. Alexander:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 221671.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for information concerning U.S. 271 and a specified motor vehicle accident. You state that most of the requested information will be released to the requestor. You claim, however, that a portion of 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 representative sample of information.[1]

Section 552.111 of the Government Code 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." Section 552.111 encompasses information that is protected by civil discovery privileges. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 647 at 3 (1996), 251 at 2-4 (1980). We note that section 552.111 is applicable to communications that involve a governmental body's consultants. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 631 at 2 (1995) (section 552.111 encompasses information created for governmental body by outside consultant acting at

[1] We 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.

governmental body's request and performing task that is within governmental body's authority), 563 at 5-6 (1990) (private entity engaged in joint project with governmental body may be regarded as its consultant).

You contend that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.111 as information that would be privileged from civil discovery pursuant to 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, 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).

You state that U.S. 271 is a federal-aid highway within the meaning of section 409 of title 23, and you indicate that section 409 would protect the submitted information from discovery in civil litigation. Therefore, based on your representations and our review of the submitted documents, we conclude that the department may withhold the submitted information in its entirety pursuant to section 552.111 of the Government 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, upon receiving this ruling, the governmental body will either release the public records promptly pursuant to section 552.221(a) of the Government Code or file a lawsuit challenging this ruling pursuant to section 552.324 of the Government Code. If the governmental body fails to do one of these things, 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); *Tex. 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/jev

Ref: ID# 221671

Enc: Submitted documents

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