



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

July 13, 2005

Ms. Lynda K. Russell
District Attorney
123 Judicial District, Shelby County
200 San Augustine Street, Suite # 2
Center, Texas 75935

OR2005-06211

Dear Ms. Russell:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under the Public Information Act (the "Act"), chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 227945.

The Shelby County District Attorney's Office (the "district attorney") received a request for a copy of an investigative file regarding the death of an inmate in the county jail.¹ You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure pursuant to section 552.108 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim.

Initially, we must address the district attorney's obligations under section 552.301 of the Act. Pursuant to section 552.301(b) of the Government Code, a governmental body must ask for an attorney general's decision and state the exceptions that apply no later than the tenth business day after the date of receiving the written request. Section 552.301(e) of the Government Code provides that a governmental body is required to submit to this office within fifteen business days of receiving an open records request (1) general written comments stating the reasons why the stated exceptions apply that would allow the information to be withheld, (2) a copy of the written request for information, (3) a signed statement or sufficient evidence showing the date the governmental body received the written request, and (4) a copy of the specific information requested or representative samples, labeled to indicate which exceptions apply to which parts of the documents. In this instance,

¹As you have not submitted the request for information, we take our description from your brief.

the district attorney has failed to provide sufficient evidence showing the date it received the written request. Thus, we are unable to determine whether you have requested a decision within ten business days. Furthermore, as of the date of this letter, you have not submitted to this office a copy of the written request for information, nor have you submitted copies of the specific information requested for our review. Consequently, the district attorney failed to comply with the requirements of section 552.301.

Pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, a governmental body's failure to comply with the procedural requirements of section 552.301 results in the legal presumption that the requested information is public and must be released, unless the governmental body demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information from disclosure. *See* Gov't Code § 552.302; *Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381-82 (Tex. App.—Austin 1990, no writ) (governmental body must make compelling demonstration to overcome presumption of openness pursuant to statutory predecessor to section 552.302); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). Section 552.108 of the Government Code is a discretionary exception to disclosure that protects a governmental body's interests and may be waived. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 586 (1991) (governmental body may waive predecessor to section 552.108), 522 at 4 (1989) (discretionary exceptions in general); *but see* Open Records Decision Nos. 630 at 3 (1994), 586 at 3 (1991) (need of another governmental body to withhold information under predecessor to section 552.108 can provide compelling reason under section 552.302). In this instance, the district attorney's claim under section 552.108 is not a compelling reason for non-disclosure under section 552.302. Therefore, you may not withhold the requested information under section 552.108 of the Government Code. Furthermore, as you have not submitted the requested information to this office for review, we have no basis for finding any of the information confidential by law. Thus, we have no choice but to order you to release the requested information in accordance with section 552.302.

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,



Debbie K. Lee
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

DKL/seg

Ref: ID# 227945

c: Mr. Charles Nichols
617 East Lacy Street
Palestine, Texas 75801