



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

July 21, 2005

Ms. Sharon Alexander
Associate General Counsel
Texas Department of Transportation
Dewitt C. Greer State Highway Bldg.
125 E. 11th St.
Austin, Texas 78701-2483

OR2005-06515

Dear Ms. Alexander:

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# 228569.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for several categories of information regarding US Expressway 83 and the Bicentennial Bridge. You claim that the submitted 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.¹

We note that the some of the submitted information is subject to section 552.022 of the Government Code, which enumerates categories of information that are not excepted from required disclosure unless they "are expressly confidential under other law." Gov't Code § 552.022. This section provides in pertinent part:

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.

(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, excepted as provided by Section 552.108[.]

Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(1). Some of the documents in Exhibit B are completed reports; therefore, the department 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 is therefore not "other law" for purposes of section 552.022. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary exceptions in general); 470 at 7 (1987) (statutory predecessor to section 552.111 may be waived).

However, the department contends that the completed reports in Exhibit B are excepted from disclosure 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.

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 state that the information at issue relates to Loop 250, which is part of the National Highway System under section 103 of title 23 of the United States Code. Thus, Loop 250 is a federal-aid highway within the meaning of section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. You assert that section 409 of title 23 would protect Exhibit B from discovery in civil litigation. Upon review, we determine that the department may withhold the completed reports under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code.

Now we turn to your argument for the remaining documents in Exhibit B. 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 91980). You claim that the remaining information in Exhibit B 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. Thus, based on your representations and our review of the information at issue, we conclude that the department may withhold the remaining information in Exhibit B under section 552.111 of the Government Code.

Finally, you claim that Exhibit C is excepted from disclosure under section 552.111, which also encompasses the deliberative process privilege. *See* Open Records Decision No. 615 at 2 (1993). The purpose of this exception is to protect advice, opinion, and recommendation in the decisional process and to encourage open and frank discussion in the deliberative process. *See Austin v. City of San Antonio*, 630 S.W.2d 391, 394 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1982, no writ); Open Records Decision No. 538 at 1-2 (1990).

In Open Records Decision No. 615 (1993), this office re-examined the statutory predecessor to section 552.111 in light of the decision in *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ). We determined that section 552.111 excepts from disclosure only those internal communications that consist of advice, recommendations, and opinions that reflect the policymaking processes of the governmental body. *See* Open Records Decision No. 615 at 5. A governmental body's policymaking functions do not encompass routine internal administrative or personnel matters, and disclosure of information about such matters will not inhibit free discussion of policy issues among agency personnel. *Id.*; *see also City of Garland v. The Dallas Morning News*, 22 S.W.3d 351 (Tex. 2000) (section 552.111 not applicable to personnel-related communications that did not involve policymaking). A governmental body's policymaking functions do include administrative and personnel matters of broad scope that affect the governmental body's policy mission. *See* Open Records Decision No. 631 at 3 (1995). Furthermore, section 552.111 does not protect facts and written observations of facts and events that are severable from advice, opinions, and recommendations. *See* Open Records

Decision No. 615 at 5. But, if factual information is so inextricably intertwined with material involving advice, opinion, or recommendation as to make severance of the factual data impractical, the factual information also may be withheld under section 552.111. *See* Open Records Decision No. 313 at 3 (1982). 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 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 state that Exhibit C consists of intra-agency communications of internal pre-decisional deliberations regarding agency policy. You explain that these communications contain the advice, opinions, and recommendations of department employees and contractors concerning US Expressway 83 and the Bicentennial Bridge. Having considered your arguments and reviewed the submitted information, we conclude that the department has established the applicability of the section 552.111 to some of Exhibit C. However, we find that you have not demonstrated how portions of the information you seek to withhold contain the advice, opinions, and recommendations of the department. Further, portions of the documents are purely factual and do not reflect the internal deliberations of the department on matters concerning the department's policy. Accordingly, the department may only withhold the information we have marked in Exhibit C under section 552.111 of the Government Code. The remaining information in Exhibit C must be released.

In summary, the department may withhold the completed reports in Exhibit B under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. The department may withhold the remaining documents in Exhibit B, as well as the information we have marked in Exhibit C pursuant to section 552.111 of the Government Code. The remaining information must be released.

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).

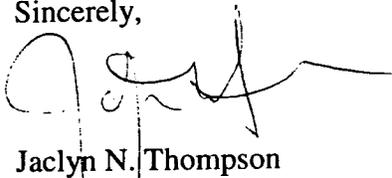
If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, upon receiving this ruling, the governmental body will either release the public records 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,



Jaclyn N. Thompson
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JNT/krl

Ref: ID# 228569

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Leo S. Pruneda
621 S. Tenth St.
Edinburg, Texas 78539
(w/o enclosures)