ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

August 2, 2005

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

OR2005-06932

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# 232337.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for information concerning a traffic light at the intersection of FM 270 and FM 518.[1] 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.

We begin by noting that the submitted documents constitute completed reports that are subject to section 552.022 of the Government Code. Section 552.022 provides several categories of information that are not excepted from required disclosure unless they "are expressly confidential under other law," and 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

[1] With regard to the questions raised by the requestor in her request for information, we agree that the Act does not require a governmental body to answer questions or perform legal research. *See* Open Records Decision No. 555 at 1-2 (1990). However, a governmental body must make a good faith effort to attempt to relate a request to information it holds. *See* Open Records Decision No. 561 at 8 (1990).

> 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[.]

Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(1). The submitted information is expressly public under section 552.022(a)(1) and may only be withheld if confidential under other law or excepted from disclosure under section 552.108. Although you argue that the submitted information is excepted under section 552.111 of the Government Code, section 552.111 is a discretionary exception to disclosure and is not "other law" for purposes of section 552.022.[2] Thus, the submitted information may not be withheld under section 552.111.

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:

> 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*

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[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 statutory predecessor to section 552.111); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 522 at 4 (1989) (discretionary exceptions in general). Discretionary exceptions do not constitute "other law" that makes information confidential.

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 FM 270 and FM 519 are part of the National Highway System and are therefore federal-aid highways within the meaning of section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. You further assert that section 409 of title 23 would protect this information from discovery in civil litigation. Based on your representations and our review of the submitted information, 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, 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,

Lauren E. Kleine
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

LEK/jev

Ref: ID# 232337

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Ms. Tracy Gates
4611 28th Street
Dickinson, Texas 77539-5507
(w/o enclosures)