



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

September 14, 2005

Ms. Pamela Smith
Assistant General Counsel
Texas Department of Public Safety
P.O. Box 4087
Austin, Texas 78773-0001

OR2005-08406

Dear Ms. Smith:

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# 232187.

The Texas Department of Public Safety (the "department") received a request for the police report, accident report, and in-car video related to a specified traffic accident and subsequent police shooting. You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.108 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Initially, we note that you have not submitted the requested police report to this office for review, nor do you tell us that you have released any such information to the requestor. Therefore, to the extent it exists, you must immediately release such information if you have not already done so. *See* Gov't Code §§ 552.006, .301(a), .302; *see also* Open Records Decision No. 664 (2000) (noting that if governmental body concludes that no exceptions apply to requested information, it must release information as soon as possible).

Next, we note that pursuant to section 552.301(e), 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. You contend that because "[t]he requestor has not provided the required identifying information or fee pursuant to § 550.065, Transportation Code, [the department is] not releasing an accident report at this time[.]" It is clear from this statement that the department maintains a copy of the accident report at issue. However, you have not requested a ruling on this

document, nor have you submitted a copy of the accident report to this office for our review. Thus, the department has failed to comply with section 552.301 of the Government Code.

Pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, a governmental body's failure to comply with 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).

Generally, a governmental body can overcome the presumption that information is public under section 552.302 by demonstrating that the information is confidential by law or that its disclosure affects third party interests. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 630 at 3 (1994), 325 at 2 (1982). Although you claim that the accident report is confidential, because you have not submitted it for our review, we have no basis for finding any portion of the accident report confidential under the Act. We, therefore, conclude that the department must release the accident report in its entirety. We caution, however, that the distribution of confidential information constitutes a criminal offense. Gov't Code § 552.352.

We now address your arguments regarding the submitted video. Section 552.108(a) excepts from disclosure “[i]nformation held by a law enforcement agency or prosecutor that deals with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime . . . if: (1) release of the information would interfere with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime.” Gov't Code § 552.108(a)(1). Generally, a governmental body claiming section 552.108 must reasonably explain how and why the release of the requested information would interfere with law enforcement. *See* Gov't Code §§ 552.108(a)(1), (b)(1), .301(e)(1)(A); *see also Ex parte Pruitt*, 551 S.W.2d 706 (Tex. 1977). You state that the submitted video relates to a pending criminal investigation. Based upon this representation, we conclude that the release of the video would interfere with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime. *See Houston Chronicle Publ'g Co. v. City of Houston*, 531 S.W.2d 177 (Tex. Civ. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1975), *writ ref'd n.r.e. per curiam*, 536 S.W.2d 559 (Tex. 1976) (court delineates law enforcement interests that are present in active cases). Although section 552.108(a)(1) authorizes you to withhold the submitted video from disclosure, you may choose to release all or part of the video that is not otherwise confidential by law. *See* Gov't Code § 552.007.

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).

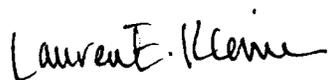
If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, upon receiving this ruling, the governmental body will either release the public records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

Ref: ID# 232187

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Mr. Jimmy D. Isaac
Longview News Journal
P.O. Box 1792
Longview, Texas 75606
(w/o enclosures)