



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

November 21, 2005

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

OR2005-10534

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# 236759.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for information relating to motor vehicle accidents and claims for damages involving a particular portion of U.S. Highway 271 during a specified time interval. You have submitted a representative sample of information that the department seeks to withhold under section 552.111 of the Government Code, section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code, and section 550.065 of the Transportation Code.¹ We have considered your arguments and have reviewed the submitted information. We assume that the department has released any other types of information that are responsive to this request, to the extent that such information existed when the department received the request.² If not, then the department must release

¹This letter ruling assumes that the submitted representative sample of information is truly representative of the requested information as a whole. This ruling neither reaches nor authorizes the department to withhold any information that is substantially different from the submitted information. See Gov't Code §§ 552.301(e)(1)(D), .302; Open Records Decision Nos. 499 at 6 (1988), 497 at 4 (1988).

²We note that the Act does not require the department to release information that did not exist when it received this request or create responsive information. See *Econ. Opportunities Dev. Corp. v. Bustamante*, 562 S.W.2d 266 (Tex. Civ. App.—San Antonio 1978, writ dismissed); Open Records Decision Nos. 605 at 2 (1992), 555 at 1 (1990), 452 at 3 (1986), 362 at 2 (1983).

any such information immediately. *See* Gov't Code §§ 552.221, .301, .302; Open Records Decision No. 664 (2000).

We initially note that some of the submitted information is subject to section 552.022 of the Government Code. Section 552.022 provides for the required public disclosure of "a completed report, audit, evaluation, or investigation made of, for, or by a governmental body," unless the information is expressly confidential under other law or excepted from disclosure under section 552.108 of the Government Code. Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(1). Section 552.111 of the Government Code is a discretionary exception to disclosure that protects a governmental body's interests and may be waived. *See* Gov't Code § 552.007; Open Records Decision Nos. 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary exceptions generally), 470 at 7 (1987) (statutory predecessor to Gov't Code § 552.111 subject to waiver). As such, section 552.111 is not other law that makes information confidential for the purposes of section 552.022. Therefore, the department may not withhold any of the submitted information that is subject to section 552.022 under section 552.111.

You contend, however, that some of the information in question is confidential under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. Section 409 is "other law" for purposes of section 552.022. *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 23 U.S.C. § 409, relied on by county in denying request under state's Public Disclosure Act). Section 409 provides that

[n]otwithstanding 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. You state that U.S. 271 is part of the National Highway System under section 103 of title 23 of the United States Code and thus is a federal-aid highway for purposes of section 409 of title 23. You also state that the submitted information was created or is maintained by the department for highway safety purposes. Based on your representations, we find that you have demonstrated that some of the submitted information that is subject to section 552.022 is confidential by law under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. The department must withhold that information, which we have marked, under the federal law.

The rest of the information that is subject to section 552.022 is contained in accident report forms that appear to have been completed pursuant to chapter 550 of the Transportation Code. *See* Transp. Code § 550.064 (officer's accident report). Section 550.065(b) states that except as provided by subsection (c), accident reports are privileged and confidential. Section 550.065(c)(4) provides for the release of an accident report to a person who provides two of the following three pieces of information: (1) the date of the accident; (2) the name of any person involved in the accident; and (3) the specific location of the accident. *See id.* § 550.065(c)(4). Under this provision, the Texas Department of Public Safety or another governmental entity is required to release a copy of an accident report to a person who provides the agency with two or more of the three items of information specified by the statute. *Id.* In this instance, the requestor has not provided two of the three required items of information. Therefore, the district must withhold the information contained in the accident report forms under section 550.065 of the Transportation Code.

Next, we address your claim under section 552.111 of the Government Code with respect to the rest of the submitted information. Section 552.111 excepts from public disclosure "an interagency or intraagency memorandum or letter that would not be available by law to a party in litigation with the agency." Gov't Code § 552.111. Federal courts have stated that section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code 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 contend that the remaining information would be privileged from discovery in civil litigation under section 409 and thus is excepted from disclosure under section 552.111 of the Government Code. Having considered your arguments, we find that the remaining information falls within the scope of section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. We therefore conclude that the department may withhold the rest of the information under section 552.111 of the Government Code.

In summary: (1) the department must withhold the submitted information that is subject to section 552.022 of the Government Code under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code and section 550.065 of the Transportation Code; and (2) the department may withhold the rest of the submitted information under 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).

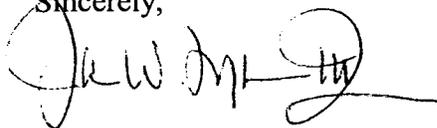
If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, upon receiving this ruling, the governmental body will either release the public records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

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James W. Morris, III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

James W. Morris, III
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JWM/sdk

Ref: ID# 236759

Enc: Submitted documents

c: Mr. Steven Mears
P.O. Box 736
Bonham, Texas 75418
(w/o enclosures)