



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

September 14, 2006

Ms. Mitzi Chafetz
Public Information Officer
Texas Funeral Service Commission
P.O. Box 12217
Austin, Texas 78711

OR2006-10710

Dear Ms. Chafetz:

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# 259375.

The Texas Funeral Service Commission (the "commission") received two requests for information pertaining to complaints filed against a specified funeral home. You indicate that the commission will release some of the requested information. You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.¹

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.

Initially, we must address the commission's obligations under the Act. Pursuant to section 552.301(b), a governmental body that receives a request for information that it wishes to withhold must ask for the attorney general's decision and state the exceptions that apply within ten business days after receiving the request. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(a), (b). We note that the commission received the first request for information on June 26, 2006. However, you did not request a decision from this office until July 13, 2006. *See id.* § 552.308 (describing rules for calculating submission of documents sent via first class United States mail, common or contract carrier, or interagency mail). Consequently, you failed to comply with 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. Information that is presumed public must be released unless a governmental body demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information to overcome this presumption. *See id.* § 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 may demonstrate a compelling reason to withhold information by a showing that the information is made confidential by another source of law or affects third party interests. *See* Open Records Decision No. 630 (1994). Because section 552.101 can provide a compelling reason to withhold information, we will address your claim regarding this exception.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from public disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." Gov't Code § 552.101. This exception encompasses information that other statutes make confidential. You raise section 552.101 in conjunction with section 651.203 of the Occupations Code. Section 651.203(b) provides that "[i]nformation in a [complaint file maintained by the commission], other than information relating to a complaint that has not reached a final disposition, is public information." Occ. Code § 651.203(b). We conclude that this language makes confidential information relating to a complaint that has not reached a final disposition. You state that the submitted information relates to a complaint that is currently under investigation. Based on your representation and our review of the information at issue, we agree that the commission must withhold the submitted information under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 651.203(b) of the Occupations 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,



Lisa V. Cubriel
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

LVC/eb

Ref: ID# 259375

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Ms. Theresa Zapeda
Brunkenhoefer & Nielsen, P.C.
555 N. Carancahua, Suite 1770
Corpus Christi, Texas 78478
(w/o enclosures)

Mr. Fred S. Pfeifer
P.O. Box 519
Donna, Texas 78537
(w/o enclosures)