



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

May 2, 2008

Mr. James G. Nolan
Assistant General Counsel
Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts
P.O. Box 13528
Austin, Texas 78711-3528

OR2008-06043

Dear Mr. Nolan:

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# 309821.

The Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts (the "comptroller") received requests for field study and valuation information related to the Annual Property Value Study conducted by the comptroller pertaining to five specific school districts. You state that you are providing a portion of the information to the requestor. You claim that the submitted information is Multiple Listing Service ("MLS") information the comptroller obtained from the Texas Association of Realtors ("TAR"), which is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101 and 552.148 of the Government Code. You also state that the submitted information may contain proprietary information, and thus, pursuant to section 552.305 of the Government Code, you have notified TAR of the request and of its right to submit arguments to this office as to why the information should not be released. *See Gov't Code § 552.305(d); see also Open Records Decision No. 542 (1990) (determining that statutory predecessor to section 552.305 permits governmental body to rely on interested third party to raise and explain applicability of exception to disclosure under the Act in certain circumstances).* We have considered the claimed exceptions and reviewed the submitted information.¹

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." Gov't Code § 552.101. This section encompasses information protected by other statutes. Section 403.304 of the Government Code provides:

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) All information the comptroller obtains from a person, other than a government or governmental subdivision or agency, under an assurance that the information will be kept confidential, in the course of conducting a study of school district values is confidential and may not be disclosed except as provided in Subsection (b).

(b) Information made confidential by this section may be disclosed:

- (1) in a judicial or administrative proceeding pursuant to a lawful subpoena;
- (2) to the person who gave the information to the comptroller; or
- (3) for statistical purposes if in a form that does not identify specific property or a specific property owner.

Gov't Code § 403.304. You inform us that the information at issue was obtained from TAR, a non-governmental entity, in the course of conducting the comptroller's Annual Property Value Survey, a study required under section 403.302 of the Government Code that evaluates school district property values. *See* Gov't Code § 403.302. The comptroller and TAR inform us that the information was obtained pursuant to a subscription agreement with TAR, which incorporates TAR's Rules and Regulations. These Rules and Regulations state that the information will be considered confidential by the comptroller. Thus, we agree that the comptroller obtained the information under an assurance that it will be kept confidential. You also state that none of the exceptions to confidentiality set forth in subsection 403.304(b) applies in this instance. Based on your representations and our review, we agree that the submitted information is confidential under section 403.304(a) of the Government Code.

The comptroller also raises section 552.148 of the Government Code, which provides in relevant part, "[i]nformation relating to real property sales prices, descriptions, characteristics, and other related information received from a private entity by the comptroller or the chief appraiser of an appraisal district under Chapter 6, Tax Code, is excepted from the requirements of Section 552.021." Gov't Code § 552.148(a). You state that the submitted information consists of MLS information obtained from a private entity. Based on your representations and our review of the information at issue, we find that the information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.148(a) of the Government Code.

However, subsection (c) of section 552.148 provides in relevant part that:

[n]otwithstanding Subsection (a) or Section 403.304, Government Code, so as to assist a property owner, a school district, or an appraisal district in a protest filed under Section 403.303, Government Code, the property owner, the district, or an agent of the property owner or district may, on request, obtain from the comptroller any information, including confidential

information, obtained by the comptroller in connection with the comptroller's finding that is being protested.

Gov't Code § 552.148(c). In this case, you state that while the requestor is a representative of the Jim Wells County Appraisal District ("JWCAD"), "there has been no protest filed by [the requestor] or [JWCAD] under section 403.303." Therefore, section 552.148(c) is inapplicable to the submitted information at this time. Consequently, the comptroller must withhold the information under section 552.148(a) of the Government Code and under section 552.101 in conjunction with section 403.304(a) of the Government Code.

You also ask this office to issue a previous determination permitting the comptroller to withhold MLS data obtained by the comptroller in furtherance of the Annual Property Value Study from a private entity under an assurance of confidentiality under sections 552.148 and 552.101 in conjunction with section 403.304 of the Government Code, without requesting a ruling from this office. We decline to issue such a previous determination at this time.

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 file suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such a challenge, 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 challenge 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,



Laura E. Ream
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

LER/jb

Ref: ID# 309821

Enc: Submitted documents

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