



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS  
GREG ABBOTT

October 6, 2008

Mr. Paul Webb  
Attorney at Law  
221 North Houston Street  
Wharton, Texas 77488

OR2008-13623

Dear Mr. Webb:

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# 323710.

The City of Wharton (the "city"), which you represent, received a request for "copies of all contracts involving the construction of the Santa Fe Drainage Out Fall Project." You state that some of the requested information is available to the requestor. You claim that the submitted information may contain proprietary or private information subject to exception under the Act, but make no arguments and take no position as to whether the information is so excepted. You indicate that you have notified interested third parties of the request and of their opportunity to submit comments to this office as to why the requested 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 the applicability of exception to disclose under Act in certain circumstances). We have received comments from Frank Felcman, Wilbert and Katherine Kainer, and the attorney representing Edwin W. Kostka and Wilbert and Benedict Hundl. We have reviewed the submitted information.

Initially, you assert that the request for information was withdrawn by operation of law because the city sent the requestor a cost estimate pertaining to this information on July 30, 2008, and as of August 14, 2008 the city has not received a response from the requestor. *See* Gov't Code §§ 552.2615(a), .263(f). However, we have examined the cost estimate upon which your representation is based and have determined that it does not

comply with the provisions of section 552.2615 of the Act. Accordingly, we conclude the requestor's public information request has not been withdrawn by operation of law because the requestor has not received a cost estimate that complies with section 552.2615 for providing this information. *See id.* § 552.2615.

Next, we note that an interested third party is allowed ten business days after the date of its receipt of the governmental body's notice under section 552.305(d) of the Government Code to submit its reasons, if any, as to why requested information relating to it should be withheld from disclosure. *See* Gov't Code § 552.305(d)(2)(B). As of the date of this letter, Bernard Svatek and Richard R. Matz have not submitted to this office any reasons explaining why the submitted information should not be released.<sup>1</sup> Thus, these individuals have not demonstrated that any of their information is proprietary for purposes of the Act. *See id.* § 552.110(b) (to prevent disclosure of commercial or financial information, party must show by specific factual or evidentiary material, not conclusory or generalized allegations, that it actually faces competition and that substantial competitive injury would result from disclosure); Open Records Decision Nos. 552 at 5 (1990) (party must establish *prima facie* case that information is trade secret) 542 at 3 (1990). Accordingly, we conclude that the city may not withhold any portion of the information pertaining to Bernard Svatek and Richard R. Matz on the basis of any proprietary interests that these individuals may have in the information.

We understand Frank Felcman, Wilbert and Katherine Kainer, and the attorney representing Edwin W. Kostka and Wilbert and Benedict Hundl to claim that some of their information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.110 of the Government Code, which protects the proprietary interests of private parties by excepting from disclosure two types of information: trade secrets and commercial or financial information the release of which would cause a third party substantial competitive harm. Section 552.110(a) of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "[a] trade secret obtained from a person and privileged or confidential by statute or judicial decision." Gov't Code § 552.110(a). The Texas Supreme Court has adopted the definition of trade secret from section 757 of the Restatement of Torts. *Hyde Corp. v. Huffines*, 314 S.W.2d 763 (Tex.1958); *see also* ORD 552 at 2. Section 757 provides that a trade secret is

any formula, pattern, device or compilation of information which is used in one's business, and which gives him an opportunity to obtain an advantage over competitors who do not know or use it. It may be a formula for a chemical compound, a process of manufacturing, treating or preserving materials, a pattern for a machine or other device, or a list of customers. It differs from other secret information in a business . . . in that it is not simply

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<sup>1</sup>The city informs us that Bernard Svatek's notice was returned undeliverable. Section 552.305(d) provides that a governmental body "must make a good faith effort to notify third parties of a request for information and of their right to submit arguments to this office as to why the information should not be released." *See* Gov't Code § 552.305(d).

information as to single or ephemeral events in the conduct of the business . . . A trade secret is a process or device for continuous use in the operation of the business . . . [It may] relate to the sale of goods or to other operations in the business, such as a code for determining discounts, rebates or other concessions in a price list or catalogue, or a list of specialized customers, or a method of bookkeeping or other office management.

RESTATEMENT OF TORTS § 757 cmt. b (1939); *see also Huffines*, 314 S.W.2d at 776. In determining whether particular information constitutes a trade secret, this office considers the Restatement's definition of trade secret as well as the Restatement's list of six trade secret factors. RESTATEMENT OF TORTS § 757 cmt. b (1939). The following are the six factors that the Restatement gives as indicia of whether information constitutes a trade secret:

- (1) the extent to which the information is known outside of the company;
- (2) the extent to which it is known by employees and others involved in the company's business;
- (3) the extent of measures taken by the company to guard the secrecy of the information;
- (4) the value of the information to the company and its competitors;
- (5) the amount of effort or money expended by the company in developing the information; and
- (6) the ease or difficulty with which the information could be properly acquired or duplicated by others.

RESTATEMENT OF TORTS § 757 cmt. b (1939); *see also* Open Records Decision Nos. 319 at 2 (1982), 306 at 2 (1982), 255 at 2 (1980). This office has held that if a governmental body takes no position with regard to the application of the trade secret branch of section 552.110 to requested information, we must accept a private person's claim for exception as valid under that branch if that person establishes a *prima facie* case for exception and no argument is submitted that rebuts the claim as a matter of law. ORD 552 at 5-6. However, we cannot conclude that section 552.110(a) applies unless it has been shown that the information meets the definition of a trade secret and the necessary factors have been demonstrated to establish a trade secret claim. *See* Open Records Decision No. 402 (1983).

Section 552.110(b) excepts from disclosure "[c]ommercial or financial information for which it is demonstrated based on specific factual evidence that disclosure would cause substantial competitive harm to the person from whom the information was obtained." Gov't Code § 552.110(b). Section 552.110(b) requires a specific factual or evidentiary showing,

not conclusory or generalized allegations, that substantial competitive injury would likely result from release of the requested information. See ORD 661 at 5-6 (business enterprise must show by specific factual evidence that release of information would cause it substantial competitive harm).

Frank Felcman states that “[the requestor] does not own any of the property and I do not feel it is his right to inquire into my personal business.” Wilbert and Katherine Kainer state that “[i]t is none of [the requestor’s] business what [the city] and I have agreed upon.” The attorney representing Edwin W. Kostka and Wilbert and Benedict Hundl states that “[m]y clients object [because the] request seeks information which is confidential[; t]he confidential purchase contracts contain information as to the terms and conditions of the purchase and personal information of my client[, and the purchase agreement] was and is confidential.”<sup>2</sup> After reviewing their arguments and the submitted information, we find that Frank Felcman, Wilbert and Katherine Kainer, and the attorney representing Edwin W. Kostka and Wilbert and Benedict Hundl have failed to demonstrate the applicability of section 552.110 of the Government Code to the submitted information. Accordingly, we conclude that no portion of the submitted information may be withheld under section 552.110 of the Government Code.

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 the doctrine of common-law privacy, which protects information if (1) the information contains highly intimate or embarrassing facts the publication of which would be highly objectionable to a reasonable person, and (2) the information is not of legitimate concern to the public. *Indus. Found. v. Tex. Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 685 (Tex. 1976). To demonstrate the applicability of common-law privacy, both prongs of this test must be demonstrated. *Id.* at 681-82. This office has determined that financial information that relates only to an individual ordinarily satisfies the first element of the common-law privacy test, but the public has a legitimate interest in the essential facts about a financial transaction between an individual and a governmental body. See Open Records Decision Nos. 545 at 4 (1990) (attorney general has found kinds of financial information not excepted from public disclosure by common-law privacy to generally be those regarding receipt of governmental funds or debts owed to governmental entities), 523 at 4 (1989) (noting distinction under common-law privacy between confidential background financial information furnished to public body about individual and

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<sup>2</sup>We note that the city agreed “that the contracts and information would be confidential.” Information is not confidential under the Act simply because the party that submits the information anticipates or requests that it be kept confidential. See *Indus. Found. v. Tex. Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 677 (Tex. 1976). In other words, a governmental body cannot overrule or repeal provisions of the Act through an agreement or contract. See Attorney General Opinion JM-672 (1987); Open Records Decision Nos. 541 at 3 (1990) (“[T]he obligations of a governmental body under [the Act] cannot be compromised simply by its decision to enter into a contract.”), 203 at 1 (1978) (mere expectation of confidentiality by person supplying information does not satisfy requirements of statutory predecessor to Gov’t Code § 552.110).

basic facts regarding particular financial transaction between individual and public body), 373 at 4 (1983) (determination of whether public's interest in obtaining personal financial information is sufficient to justify its disclosure must be made on case-by-case basis). In this instance, the submitted information pertains to financial transactions between individuals and the city. Thus, we determine that none of the submitted information is confidential for purposes of common-law privacy. Accordingly, the city may not withhold any of the submitted information under section 552.101 of the Government Code on this basis. As you raise no other exceptions to disclosure, the submitted information must be released.

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). If the governmental body does not file suit over 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,



Bill Dobie  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

WJD/jh

Ref: ID# 323710

Enc. Submitted documents

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