



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

GREG ABBOTT

November 7, 2008

Mr. David M. Swope
Assistant County Attorney
1019 Congress, 15th Floor
Houston, Texas 77002

OR2008-15392

Dear Mr. Swope:

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# 327415.

The Harris County Purchasing Agent (the "county") received a request for information pertaining to a specified solicitation for an integrated security management system. You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101 and 552.136 of the Government Code. You also believe that some of the submitted information implicates the proprietary interests of a third party under section 552.110 of the Government Code. You indicate that the county notified NetVersant-Texas, Inc. ("NetVersant") of this request for information and of their right to submit arguments to this office as to why the requested information should not be released. *See Gov't Code § 552.305(d); Open Records Decision No. 542 (1990) (statutory predecessor to section 552.305 permitted governmental body to rely on interested third party to raise and explain applicability of exception to disclosure under certain circumstances).* We have received arguments from NetVersant. We have considered the submitted arguments and reviewed the submitted information.¹

The county indicates that the submitted information is confidential under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 262.030 of the Local Government Code. Section 552.101 excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." This section encompasses information protected by other statutes. Section 262.030(c) of the Local Government Code

¹We note that the request at issue requests four categories of documents. You have only submitted a proposal from NetVersant. To the extent any additional information responsive to the request, we assume you have released it. If you have not released any such records, you must do so at this time. *See Gov't Code §§552.301(a), 302; see also Open Records Decision No. 664 (2000) (if governmental body concludes that no exceptions apply to requested information, it must release information as soon as possible).*

provides a competitive proposal procedure for the purchase of high technology items by a county, and states in pertinent part:

(c) If provided in the request for proposals, proposals shall be opened so as to avoid disclosure of contents to competing offerors and kept secret during the process of negotiation. All proposals that have been submitted shall be available and open for public inspection after the contract is awarded, except for trade secrets and confidential information contained in the proposals and identified as such.

In general, section 552.101 only excepts information from disclosure where the express language of a statute makes certain information confidential or states that information shall not be released to the public. Open Records Decision No. 478 (1987). The plain language of section 262.030(c) does not expressly make bid proposals confidential. Section 262.030(c) only requires a governmental body to take adequate precautions to protect bid proposals from competing bidders. Accordingly, we determine that the information at issue is not confidential pursuant to section 262.030(c). Thus, the county may not withhold any portion of the submitted information pursuant to section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 262.030 of the Local Government Code.

The county also asserts that some of the submitted information may be excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code on the basis of federal copyright law. However, copyright law does not make information confidential for purposes of section 552.101. *See* Open Records Decision No. 660 at 5 (1999). Thus, the county may not withhold the submitted information under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with copyright law.

Next, we address the arguments submitted by NetVersant. Section 552.110 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.” 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 (1990). 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 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.² RESTATEMENT OF TORTS § 757 cmt. b. 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). We also note that pricing information pertaining to a particular contract is generally not a trade secret because it is "simply information as to single or ephemeral events in the conduct of the business," rather than "a process or device for continuous use in the operation of the business." RESTATEMENT OF TORTS § 757 cmt. b; *see Huffines*, 314 S.W.2d at 776; Open Records Decision Nos. 319 at 3 (1982), 306 at 3 (1982).

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." 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 (1999) (business enterprise must show by specific factual evidence that release of information would cause it substantial competitive harm). However, the pricing information of a winning bidder is generally not excepted under section 552.110(b). *See* Open Records Decision No. 514 (1988) (public has interest in knowing prices charged by government contractors), 319 at 3 (1982) (information relating to organization and personnel, market studies, professional references, qualifications and

²The 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; (6) the ease or difficulty with which the information could be properly acquired or duplicated by others. RESTATEMENT OF TORTS § 757 cmt. b; *see also* Open Records Decision Nos. 319 at 2 (1982), 306 at 2 (1982), 255 at 2 (1980).

experience, and pricing are not ordinarily excepted from disclosure under statutory predecessor to section 552.110). *See generally* Freedom of Information Act Guide & Privacy Act Overview, 219 (2000) (federal cases applying analogous Freedom of Information Act reasoning that disclosure of prices charged government is a cost of doing business with government). Moreover, we believe the public has a strong interest in the release of prices in government contract awards. *See* OpenRecords Decision Nos. 514 (1988) (public has interest in knowing prices charged by government contractors).

NetVersant seeks to withhold a project specific scope of work, pricing, and the company's residency, tax, and insurance information under section 552.110. Upon review of NetVersant's arguments, we conclude that NetVersant has failed to establish that this information meets the definition of a trade secret or demonstrated the necessary factors to establish a trade secret claim. *See* Restatement of Torts § 757 cmt. b (1939) (information is generally not trade secret unless it constitutes "a process or device for continuous use in the operation of the business"). Therefore, no portion of the submitted information may be withheld under section 552.110(a) of the Government Code.

We also find that NetVersant has made only conclusory allegations that release of any of the submitted information would cause the company substantial competitive injury and has provided no specific factual or evidentiary showing to support such allegations. Further, NetVersant is the winning bidder in this instance; as noted above the public has a strong interest in the release of prices in government contract awards, and the pricing of a winning bidder is generally not excepted under section 552.110(b). Thus, we conclude that none of the submitted information may be withheld pursuant to section 552.110(b).

Next, we note that NetVersant's proposal contains insurance policy numbers. Section 552.136(b) of the Government Code provides that "[n]otwithstanding any other provision of this chapter, a credit card, debit card, charge card, or access device number that is collected, assembled, or maintained by or for a governmental body is confidential." The county must withhold the insurance policy numbers we have marked under section 552.136. However, you have not demonstrated how any of the remaining information you have marked constitutes access device numbers for the purposes of section 552.136, and none of it may be withheld on this basis. As no other exception to disclosure of the remaining information is raised, it must be released to the requestor.

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).

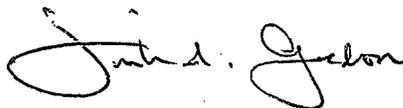
If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, upon receiving this ruling, the governmental body will either release the public records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



Justin D. Gordon
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JDG/jb

Ref: ID# 327415

Enc. Submitted documents

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