



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

March 23, 2009

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

OR2009-03737

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# 342094.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for traffic control devices inspection checklists pertaining to a specified road and from a specified time period. You claim that the requested checklists are excepted from disclosure under section 552.111 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.¹

We note that the requested traffic control devices inspection checklists are subject to section 552.022 of the Government Code, which enumerates categories of information that are not excepted from required disclosure unless they "are expressly confidential under other law." Under section 552.022(a)(1), a completed report, audit, evaluation, or investigation made of, for, or by a governmental body is expressly public unless it either is excepted under section 552.108 of the Government Code or is expressly confidential under other law. Thus,

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.

the department may only withhold this information if it is confidential under other law. Section 552.111 of the Government Code is a discretionary exception and therefore not "other law" for purposes of section 552.022. See Open Records Decision No. 470 at 7 (1987) (statutory predecessor to section 552.111 may be waived).

You also contend, however, that the requested checklists are confidential under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. Section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code is other law for purposes of section 552.022(a) of the Government Code. 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 section 409, relied upon by county in denying request under state's Public Disclosure Act). Section 409 provides as follows:

Notwithstanding 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. Federal courts have determined that section 409 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 state that the traffic control device inspection checklists at issue "[were] created for the purpose of identifying and evaluating hazards on public roads." You state that the submitted information relates to FM 2562, which is part of the National Highway System under section 103 of title 23 of the United States Code and therefore is a federal-aid highway within the meaning of section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. You assert that section 409 of title 23 would protect this information from discovery in civil litigation. Based on your representations and our review of the submitted information, we determine that the department must withhold the requested traffic control devices inspection checklists under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular information 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 information or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For more information concerning those rights and responsibilities, please visit our website at http://www.oag.state.tx.us/open/index_orl.php, or call the Office of the Attorney General's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. Questions concerning the allowable charges for providing public information under the Act must be directed to the Cost Rules Administrator of the Office of the Attorney General at (512) 475-2497.

Sincerely,



Reg Hargrove
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

RJH/eeg

Ref: ID# 342094

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)