



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

December 1, 2010

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

OR2010-18010

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# 401634.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for information pertaining to the structural conditions of roads and bridges following the 2010 summer flooding event and the inspection records of thirty-six specified bridges, excluding daily activity reports.¹ You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.111 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.²

Section 552.111 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "an interagency or intraagency memorandum or letter that would not be available by law to a party in litigation with the agency." Gov't Code § 552.111. You contend that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.111 because it would be privileged from discovery under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. Section 409 provides as follows:

¹We note the department received clarification regarding this request. *See* Gov't Code § 552.222(b) (governmental body may communicate with requestor for purpose of clarifying or narrowing request for information).

²This letter ruling assumes that the submitted representative sample of information is truly representative of the requested information as a whole. This ruling neither reaches nor authorizes the department to withhold any information that is substantially different from the submitted information. *See* Gov't Code §§ 552.301(e)(1)(D), .302; Open Records Decision Nos. 499 at 6 (1988), 497 at 4 (1988).

Notwithstanding any other provision of law, reports, surveys, schedules, lists, or data compiled or collected for the purpose of identifying, 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 stated 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.*, 965 F.2d 155, 160 (7th Cir. 1992); *Robertson v. Union Pac. R.R.*, 954 F.2d 1433, 1435 (8th Cir. 1992); *see also Pierce County v. Guillen*, 123 S.Ct. 720 (2003) (upholding constitutionality of 23 U.S.C. § 409, relied on by county in denying request under state's Public Disclosure Act).

You state the bridges to which the submitted information pertains are eligible for federal aid under section 144 of title 23 of the United States Code, so as to qualify as a federal-aid highway for the purposes of section 409 of title 23. You also state the roads at issue are part of the national highway system under section 103 of title 23 of the United States Code and are federal-aid highways for the purposes of section 409 of title 23. You indicate that the submitted information was compiled for highway safety purposes. You contend that the information at issue would be privileged from discovery in civil litigation under section 409 and is therefore excepted from disclosure under section 552.111 of the Government Code. Based on your representations, we conclude that the department may withhold the submitted information under section 552.111.

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, toll free, at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jennifer Luttrall". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Jennifer Luttrall
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JL/dls

Ref: ID# 401634

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)