ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

December 17, 2012

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

OR2012-20244

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# 478248.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for information pertaining to a specified accident. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.111 of the Government Code and section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. We have considered your arguments and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.[1]

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. Section 552.111 encompasses information protected by civil discovery privileges. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 647 at 3 (1996), 251 at 2-4 (1980). You claim the submitted information is excepted from

[1]We assume 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 those records contain substantially different types of information than those submitted to this office.

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:

> 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 148 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 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 indicate that the submitted information was created by the department for highway safety purposes. You also inform us that U.S. Highway 80 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. You contend the submitted information 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 and our review, we conclude 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,

Paige Lay

Paige Lay
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

PL/tch

Ref: ID# 478248

Enc. Submitted documents

cc: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)