



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

December 6, 2013

Ms. Kathleen Decker
Director
Litigation Division
Texas Commission on Environmental Quality
P.O. Box 13087
Austin, Texas 78711-3087

OR2013-21247

Dear Ms. Decker:

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# 507822 (TCEQ PIR No. 14-13658).

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (the "commission") received a request for all documents pertaining to the status of a specified investigation and any information obtained or recognized during or after the specified investigation. The commission states it has released some information to the requestor. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.103 and 552.111 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Section 552.103 provides as follows:

- (a) Information is excepted from [required public disclosure] if it is information relating to litigation of a civil or criminal nature to which the state or a political subdivision is or may be a party or to which an officer or employee of the state or a political subdivision, as a consequence of the person's office or employment, is or may be a party.

...

(c) Information relating to litigation involving a governmental body or an officer or employee of a governmental body is excepted from disclosure under Subsection (a) only if the litigation is pending or reasonably anticipated on the date that the requestor applies to the officer for public information for access to or duplication of the information.

Gov't Code § 552.103(a), (c). A governmental body has the burden of providing relevant facts and documents to show the section 552.103(a) exception is applicable in a particular situation. The test for meeting this burden is a showing that (1) litigation was pending or reasonably anticipated on the date the governmental body received the request for information, and (2) the information at issue is related to that litigation. *Univ. of Tex. Law Sch. v. Tex. Legal Found.*, 958 S.W.2d 479, 481 (Tex. App.—Austin 1997, orig. proceeding); *Heard v. Houston Post Co.*, 684 S.W.2d 210, 212 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1984, writ ref'd n.r.e.); Open Records Decision No. 551 at 4 (1990). A governmental body must meet both prongs of this test for information to be excepted under section 552.103(a).

The question of whether litigation is reasonably anticipated must be determined on a case-by-case basis. *See* Open Records Decision No. 452 at 4 (1986). When the governmental body is the prospective plaintiff in litigation, the evidence of anticipated litigation must at least reflect that litigation involving a specific matter is “realistically contemplated.” *See* Open Records Decision No. 518 at 5 (1989); *see also* Attorney General Opinion MW-575 (1982) (investigatory file may be withheld if governmental body’s attorney determines that it should be withheld pursuant to Gov’t Code § 552.103 and that litigation is “reasonably likely to result”).

You state the commission’s Dallas Regional Office received an anonymous complaint regarding a specified property. You state the commission’s investigator determined that violations existed and the findings were referred to the commission’s enforcement division in August 2013. You inform us the enforcement division is pursuing an enforcement action against the owner of the specified property under Docket No. 2013-17030PST-E. You further inform us that settlement negotiations are ongoing. We understand that should the negotiations fail, the matter will be forwarded to the commission’s litigation division. Therefore, based on the commission’s representations and our review of the submitted information, we conclude litigation was reasonably anticipated on the date the commission received this request for information. Furthermore, we find the submitted information is related to the anticipated litigation for purposes of section 552.103(a). Therefore, the commission may withhold the submitted information pursuant to section 552.103.¹

We note, however, once information has been obtained by all parties to the anticipated litigation through discovery or otherwise, no section 552.103(a) interest exists with respect

¹As our ruling is dispositive, we need not address your remaining argument against disclosure.

to that information. Open Records Decision Nos. 349 (1982), 320 (1982). Thus, information that has either been obtained from or provided to the opposing party in the anticipated litigation is not excepted from disclosure under section 552.103(a), and it must be disclosed. Further, the applicability of section 552.103(a) ends when the litigation has concluded or is no longer reasonably anticipated. Attorney General Opinion MW-575 at 2 (1982); Open Records Decision Nos. 350 at 3 (1982), 349 at 2.

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.texasattorneygeneral.gov/open/orl_ruling_info.shtml, 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 may be directed to the Office of the Attorney General, toll free, at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,



Thana Hussaini
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

TH/som

Ref: ID# 507822

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)