



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

September 16, 2014

Ms. Heather Stebbins
County Attorney
County of Kerr
700 Main Street, Suite BA-103
Kerrville, Texas 78028

OR2014-16323

Dear Ms. Stebbins:

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# 536893.

The Kerr County Animal Services Department (the "county") received a request for a specified animal complaint. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.108 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Initially, we must address the county's obligations under section 552.301 of the Government Code, which prescribes the procedures a governmental body must follow in asking this office to decide whether requested information is excepted from public disclosure. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301. Pursuant to section 552.301(b), a governmental body must ask for a decision from this office and state the exceptions that apply within ten business days of receiving the written request. *See id.* § 552.301(b). You do not inform us the date the county received the request for information; however, we note the request is dated June 17, 2014. You do not inform us the county was closed for any business days between June 17, 2014, and July 1, 2014. Accordingly, you were required to request a decision from this office by July 1, 2014. The envelope in which the county provided the information required by subsection 552.301(b) does not bear a postmark. *See id.* § 552.308(a)(1) (describing rules for calculating submission dates of documents sent via first class United States mail, common or contract carrier, or interagency mail). However, this office received the

information at issue on July 17, 2014. Thus, we conclude the county failed to comply with the procedural requirements mandated by section 552.301 of the Government Code.

Pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, a governmental body's failure to comply with the procedural requirements of section 552.301 results in the legal presumption that the requested information is public and must be released unless the governmental body demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information from disclosure. *See id.* § 552.302; *Simmons v. Kuzmich*, 166 S.W.3d 342, 350 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth 2005, no pet.); *Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381 (Tex. App.—Austin 1990, no writ) (governmental body must make compelling demonstration to overcome presumption of openness pursuant to statutory predecessor to section 552.302); *see also* Open Records Decision Nos. 319 (1982), 586 (1991), 630 (1994). This office has held a compelling reason exists to withhold information when third-party interests are at stake or when information is made confidential by another source of law. *See* Open Records Decision No. 150 (1977) (construing predecessor statute). Although you raise section 552.108 of the Government Code, this section is a discretionary exception that protects a governmental body's interests and may be waived. *See* Gov't Code S 552.007; Open Records Decision Nos. 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary exceptions generally), 663 at 5 (1999) (untimely request for a decision resulted in waiver of discretionary exceptions), 177 (1977) (statutory predecessor to section 552.108 subject to waiver). However, the need of a governmental body other than the agency that is seeking an open records decision to withhold information under section 552.108 of the Government Code can provide a compelling reason to withhold information from disclosure. *See* ORD 586 at 3. Because you indicate the Kerr County Attorney's Office (the "county attorney's office") objects to the release of the information at issue, we will consider whether the county may withhold the submitted information under section 552.108 on behalf of the county attorney's office.

Section 552.108(a)(1) of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "[i]nformation held by a law enforcement agency or prosecutor that deals with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime . . . if . . . release of the information would interfere with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime[.]" Gov't Code § 552.108(a)(1). A governmental body claiming section 552.108(a)(1) must reasonably explain how and why the release of the requested information would interfere with law enforcement. *See id.* §§ 552.108(a)(1), .301(e)(1)(A); *see also Ex parte Pruitt*, 551 S.W.2d 706 (Tex. 1977). Section 552.108 may be invoked by the proper custodian of information relating to a pending investigation or prosecution of criminal conduct. *See* Open Records Decision No. 474 at 4-5 (1987). Where a non-law enforcement agency has custody of information that would otherwise qualify for exception under section 552.108 as information relating to the pending case of a law enforcement agency, the custodian of the records may withhold the information if it provides this office with a demonstration the information relates to the pending case and a representation from the law enforcement agency that it wishes to have the information withheld.

You state the submitted information is related to an ongoing criminal investigation for animal cruelty. We understand the county attorney's office objects to disclosure of the information at issue because its release would interfere with the investigation. Based on your representation and our review, we conclude the county may withhold the information under section 552.108(a)(1) of the Government Code on behalf of the county attorney's office. See *Houston Chronicle Publ'g Co. v. City of Houston*, 531 S.W.2d 177 (Tex. Civ. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1975) (court delineates law enforcement interests that are present in active cases), *writ ref'd n.r.e. per curiam*, 536 S.W.2d 559 (Tex. 1976).

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,



Claire V. Morris Sloan
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

CVMS/som

Ref: ID# 536906

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)