



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

August 29, 2016

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

OR2016-19439

Dear Ms. Parker:

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# 629941.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for multiple categories of information, including information pertaining to specified roads, a specified bridge, specified permits, a specified incident, and a specified contract. You indicate the department released some information. You claim the submitted information is 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

Initially, we note the requestor asks the department to answer questions. The Act does not require a governmental body to answer factual questions, conduct legal research, or create new information in responding to a request. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 563 at 8 (1990), 555 at 1-2 (1990). However, a governmental body must make a good-faith effort to relate a request to any responsive information that is within its possession or control.

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

Open Records Decision Nos. 561 at 8-9 (1990), 555 at 102. We assume the department has made a good-faith effort to do so.

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

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.

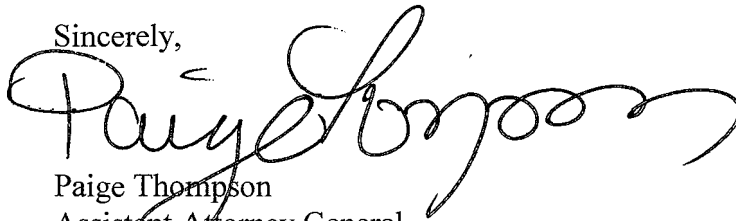
23 U.S.C. § 409. Federal courts have stated that section 409 excludes from evidence data compiled for purposes of highway and railroad crossing safety enhancement and construction for which a state receives federal funding, in order to facilitate candor in administrative evaluations of highway safety 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*, 537 U.S. 129 (2003) (upholding constitutionality of 23 U.S.C. § 409, relied on by county in denying request under state’s Public Disclosure Act).

You indicate the submitted information pertains to a bridge that is part of the National Highway System under section 144 of title 23 of the United States Code and is, therefore, federal-aid highways for the purposes of section 409 of title 23. You inform us the submitted information is used for highway safety purposes. 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, we conclude the department may withhold the submitted information under section 552.111 of the Government 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.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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paige Thompson", written over the typed name and title.

Paige Thompson
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

PT/dls

Ref: ID# 629941

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)