



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

May 26, 2017

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

OR2017-11570

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# 659470.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for all information pertaining to a road construction project at a specified intersection. You state the department will release some information. 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 representative sample of information.¹

Initially, we note some of the submitted information is subject to section 552.022 of the Government Code, which provides in pertinent part:

- (a) [T]he following categories of information are public information and not excepted from required disclosure unless made confidential under this chapter or other law:

¹We assume that 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.

(1) a completed report, audit, evaluation, or investigation made of, for, or by a governmental body, except as provided by Section 552.108 [of the Government Code]; [and]

...

(3) information in an account, voucher, or contract relating to the receipt or expenditure of public or other funds by a governmental body[.]

Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(1), (3). The submitted Traffic Control Devices Inspection Checklist is subject to section 552.022(a)(1) of the Government Code. The submitted change orders are subject to section 552.022(a)(3). You seek to withhold the information at issue under sections 552.103 and 552.111 of the Government Code. However, these sections are discretionary in nature and do not make information confidential under the Act. *See Dallas Area Rapid Transit v. Dallas Morning News*, 4 S.W.3d 469, 475-76 (Tex. App.—Dallas 1999, no pet.) (governmental body may waive section 552.103); *see also* Open Records Decision Nos. 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary exceptions generally), 663 at 5 (1999) (governmental body may waive section 552.111), 470 at 7 (1987) (governmental body may waive statutory predecessor to section 552.111 deliberative process). Therefore, the information at issue may not be withheld under section 552.103 or section 552.111 of the Government Code. However, you also contend the Traffic Control Devices Inspection Checklist is excepted from disclosure under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. We note section 409 is “other law” that makes information confidential for purposes of section 552.022(a). *See In re City of Georgetown*, 53 S.W.3d 328 (Tex. 2001); *see also Pierce County v. Guillen*, 537 U.S. 129 (2003) (upholding constitutionality of section 409, relied on by county in denying request under state’s Public Disclosure Act). Accordingly, we will consider your argument under section 409 for the Traffic Control Devices Inspection Checklists. We will also consider your arguments for the information not subject to section 552.022 of the Government Code.

Section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code 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 160 (7th Cir. 1992); *Robertson v. Union Pac. R.R.*, 954 F.2d 1433, 1435 (8th Cir. 1992); *see also Pierce*, 537 U.S. at 129.

You state the roadway to which the Traffic Control Devices Inspection Checklist pertains is eligible for federal aid under section 103 of title 23 of the United States Code, and, thus, is a federal-aid highway for the purposes of section 409 of title 23. You also state the information at issue was generated for highway safety purposes. Based upon your representations and our review, we conclude the department may withhold the Traffic Control Devices Inspection Checklist pursuant to section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code.

Section 552.103 of the Government Code 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 (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).

You state, and provide documentation demonstrating, a lawsuit styled *Rowden v. General Motors, L.L.C., et al.*, Cause No. CV17-01-092, was pending against the department in

the 271st Judicial District Court of Wise County, Texas at the time of the present request for information. You state the information not subject to section 552.022 of the Government Code is related to the pending lawsuit. Based on your representations and our review of the information at issue, we find litigation was pending when the department received this request for information, and the information at issue is related to the pending litigation for the purposes of section 552.103. Therefore, the department may withhold the information not subject to section 552.022, which we marked, under section 552.103(a) of the Government Code.

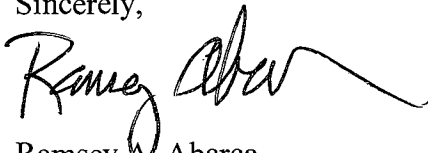
Generally, however, once information has been obtained by all parties to the litigation through discovery or otherwise, no section 552.103(a) interest exists with respect to that information. Open Records Decision Nos. 349 (1982), 320 (1982). Thus, information that has either been obtained from or provided to the opposing parties in the pending 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 once the litigation has been concluded. Attorney General Opinion MW-575 (1982); Open Records Decision No. 350 (1982).

In summary, the department may withhold the Traffic Control Devices Inspection Checklist pursuant to section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. The department may withhold the information we marked under section 552.103 of the Government Code. The department must release the remaining information.

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,



Ramsey A. Abarca
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

RAA/bw

Ref: ID# 659470

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)