



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

November 19, 2019

Ms. Katie Leininger
Assistant City Attorney
City of Pearland
3519 Liberty Drive
Pearland, Texas 77581

OR2019-32667

Dear Ms. Leininger:

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# 787560.

The City of Pearland (the "city") received four requests for e-mails sent to or from named individuals containing certain keywords, and information related to travel expenses for named individuals during a specified time period. You state some information has been released to the requestors. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.103, 552.107, 552.108, and 552.117 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.¹

Section 552.103 of the Government Code provides, in relevant part:

(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.

...

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 that submitted to this office.

(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). The 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). The governmental body must meet both prongs of this test for information to be excepted under section 552.103(a). ORD 551 at 4.

To establish litigation is reasonably anticipated, a governmental body must provide this office “concrete evidence showing that the claim that litigation may ensue is more than mere conjecture.” *See* Open Records Decision No. 452 at 4 (1986). Concrete evidence to support a claim litigation is reasonably anticipated may include, for example, the governmental body’s receipt of a letter containing a specific threat to sue the governmental body from an attorney for a potential opposing party. *See* Open Records Decision No. 555 (1990); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 518 at 5 (1989) (litigation must be “realistically contemplated”). In addition, this office has concluded litigation was reasonably anticipated when the potential opposing party hired an attorney who made a demand for disputed payments and threatened to sue if the payments were not made promptly, or when an individual threatened to sue on several occasions and hired an attorney. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 346 (1982), 288 (1981). In Open Records Decision No. 638 (1996), this office stated a governmental body has met its burden of showing litigation is reasonably anticipated when it received a notice of claim letter and the governmental body represents the notice of claim letter is in compliance with the requirements of the Texas Tort Claims Act (“TTCA”), Civ. Prac. & Rem. Code, ch. 101. If a governmental body does not make this representation, the claim letter is a factor that this office will consider in determining whether a governmental body has established litigation is reasonably anticipated based on the totality of the circumstances. On the other hand, this office has determined if an individual publicly threatens to bring suit against a governmental body, but does not actually take objective steps toward filing suit, litigation is not reasonably anticipated. *See* Open Records Decision No. 331 (1982). Further, the fact a potential opposing party has hired an attorney who makes a request for information does not establish litigation is reasonably anticipated. *See* Open Records Decision No. 361 (1983).

You state, and provide documentation showing, prior to the city’s receipt of the instant requests, the city received a notice from the requestor in which the requestor raises claims of libel and defamation against city employees acting in their official capacities. The city does not affirmatively represent to this office the notice meets the requirements of the

TTCA; therefore, we will only consider the notice as a factor in determining whether the city reasonably anticipated litigation. Nevertheless, based upon the city's representations, our review of the submitted information, and the totality of the circumstances, we find the city reasonably anticipated litigation on the date it received the instant request. We further find the information at issue is related to the anticipated litigation for purposes of section 552.103. Accordingly, the city may withhold the submitted information under section 552.103 of the Government Code.²

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. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 349 (1982), 320 (1982). Thus, information that has either been obtained from or provided to all parties to the anticipated litigation is not excepted from disclosure under section 552.103(a) and must be disclosed. Further, the applicability of section 552.103(a) ends once the litigation has been concluded. *See* Attorney General Opinion MW-575 (1982); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 350 (1982).

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 <https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/open-government/members-public/what-expect-after-ruling-issued> or call the OAG's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. Questions concerning the allowable charges for providing public information under the Public Information Act may be directed to the Cost Rules Administrator of the OAG, toll free, at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,

Open Records Division

Ref: ID# 797560

Enc. Submitted documents

c: 4 Requestors
(w/o enclosures)

² As our ruling is dispositive, we need not address the remaining arguments against disclosure of this information.