



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

May 28, 2020

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

OR2020-14823

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# 831735.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for information pertaining to specified fatal motor vehicle accidents. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.111 of the Government Code and privileged under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. We have considered your arguments and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.¹

Initially, we note the submitted information is subject to section 552.022 of the Government Code. Section 552.022(a)(1) provides for required public disclosure of "a completed report, audit, evaluation, or investigation made of, for, or by a governmental body," unless the information is expressly confidential under the Act or other law or excepted from disclosure under section 552.108 of the Government Code. *See* Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(1). The submitted information consists of completed investigations pertaining to fatal motor vehicle accidents subject to section 552.022(a)(1). Although you seek to withhold the information at issue under section 552.111 of the Government Code, this section is a discretionary exception to disclosure and does not make information confidential under the Act. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary exceptions generally), 470

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.

at 7 (1987) (statutory predecessor to section 552.111 subject to waiver). Therefore, the department may not withhold this information under section 552.111 of the Government Code. However, you also contend this information 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). Thus, we will consider your argument under section 409 of title 23 of the United States 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 inform us the roadways at issue in the submitted information are part of the National Highway System under section 103 of title 23 of the United States Code and are, thus, federal-aid highways for purposes of section 409 of title 23. You explain the information at issue was collected and completed for highway safety purposes. Based upon your representations and our review, we conclude the department may withhold the submitted information pursuant to section 409 of title 23 of the United States 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 <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,

Michelle Garza
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

MRG/jxd

Ref: ID# 831735

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)