



**KEN PAXTON**  
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

September 9, 2020

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

OR2020-22697

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# 843327.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for information pertaining to a specified roadway. You state you will release some information to the requestor. 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.<sup>1</sup>

Section 552.111 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "[a]n interagency or intraagency memorandum or letter that would not be available by law to a party in litigation with the agency[.]" Gov't Code § 552.111. This exception 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 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:

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<sup>1</sup> 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 that those records contain substantially different types of information than that submitted to this office.

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).

Section 552.111 can also encompass communications between a governmental body and a third party, including a consultant or other party with a privity of interest. *See Open Records Decision No. 561 at 9 (1990)* (section 552.111 encompasses communications with party with which governmental body has privity of interest or common deliberative process). For section 552.111 to apply, the governmental body must identify the third party and explain the nature of its relationship with the governmental body. Section 552.111 is not applicable to a communication between the governmental body and a third party unless the governmental body establishes it has a privity of interest or common deliberative process with the third party. *See ORD 561*.

You state the submitted information pertains to a roadway that is part of the National Highway System under section 103 of title 23 of the United States Code and is, therefore, a federal-aid highway for the purposes of section 409 of title 23. You inform us the submitted information includes communications with a contractor with which the department has a privity of interest, and you indicate the information at issue is used for highway safety purposes. You contend the information at issue 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 <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,

Jennifer Copeland  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

JC/jxd

Ref: ID# 843327

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor  
(w/o enclosures)