



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

October 7, 2020

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

OR2020-25177

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# 848284.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for documents related to a specified location. The department claims the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.111 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception the department claims 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. Section 552.022 provides, in relevant 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:

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.

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

...

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

...

(5) all working papers, research material, and information used to estimate the need for or expenditure of public funds or taxes by a governmental body, on completion of the estimate [.]

Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(1), (3), (5). The submitted information includes a completed report that is subject to section 552.022(a)(1). The department must release the completed report pursuant to section 552.022(a)(1) unless it is excepted from disclosure under section 552.108 of the Government Code or is made confidential under the Act or other law. *See id.* § 552.022(a)(1). The submitted information also contains information in an account, contract, or voucher relating to the receipt or expenditure of funds by the department that is subject to section 552.022(a)(3) and information used to estimate the need for or expenditure of public funds or taxes by a governmental body that are subject to section 552.022(a)(5). This information must be released unless it is made confidential under the Act or other law. *See id.* § 552.022(a)(3), (5). Although the department seeks 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 id.* § 552.007; Open Records Decision Nos. 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary exceptions generally), 470 at 7 (1987) (statutory predecessor to Gov't Code § 552.111 subject to waiver). However, the department also argues 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). Accordingly, we will consider the department's argument under section 409 for the information subject to section 552.022. We will also consider the department's argument under section 552.111 against release of the remaining information.

The department argues the information subject to section 552.022(a)(5) of the Government Code is protected by section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. Section 409 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 155, 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.

The department informs us the railway-highway crossing at issue in the submitted information is eligible for federal aid and is therefore a federal-aid highway for the purposes of section 409 of title 23. The department explains the information at issue was generated for highway safety purposes. Based upon these representations and our review of the submitted information, we conclude the department may withhold the information subject to section 552.022 pursuant to section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code.

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)*. The department argues the remaining 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. *See 23 U.S.C. § 409; see also Harrison*, 965 F.2d at 160; *Robertson*, 954 F.2d at 1435; *Pierce County*, 537 U.S. 129

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*.

As noted above, the department states the information pertains to a federal-aid highway for purposes of section 409 of title 23. The information includes communications with a third party with which the department indicates it has a privity of interest, and the department states the information is used for highway safety purposes. The department argues the 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 these representations, we conclude the department may withhold the remaining information under section 552.111 of the Government Code.

In summary, the department may withhold the information subject to section 552.022 pursuant to section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code and may withhold the remaining 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,

Claire V. Morris Sloan
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

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Ref: ID# 848284

c: Requestor