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ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

January 3, 2022

Mr. James Wang
Legal Services Division
Harris County Appraisal District
P.O. Box 920975
Houston, Texas 77292-0975

OR2022-00077

Dear Mr. Wang:

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# 923771 (Reference No. 21-5336).

The Harris County Appraisal District (the "district") received a request for certain information related to forty-one specified accounts for a stated tax year. The district claims the some of submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.103 of the Government Code. We have considered the claimed exception and reviewed the submitted information. We have also received and considered comments submitted on behalf of the requestor. *See* Gov't Code § 552.304 (providing that interested party may submit written comments regarding why information should or should not be released).

Initially, we note the district has submitted information pertaining to only one of the specified accounts. To the extent any information responsive to the remainder of the request existed on the date the district received the request, we assume the district has released it. If the district has not released any such information, it must do so at this time. *See id.* §§ 552.301(a), .302; *see also* Open Records Decision No. 664 (2000) (if governmental body concludes no exceptions apply to requested information, it must release information as soon as possible).

Next, we address the requestor's claim the district failed to comply with section 552.301(b) of the Government Code in requesting a ruling from this office. Pursuant to section 552.301(b), a governmental body must ask for a decision from this office and state the exceptions that apply within ten business days of receiving the written request. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(b). In this instance, the district received the request for information on October 5, 2021. We note this office does not count the date the request was received or weekends for purposes of calculating a governmental body's deadlines under the Act. Thus, the district's ten-business-day deadline was October 19, 2021. The envelope in which the district submitted the information required by section 552.301(b) was postmarked on October 19, 2021. Upon review, we find the district complied with the requirements of section 552.301(b) in requesting this decision from our office. *See id.* § 552.308 (describing rules for calculating submission dates of documents sent via first class United States mail, common or contract carrier, or interagency mail). Thus, we will consider the district's argument against disclosure of the information at issue.

Next, the requestor asserts the information at issue is subject to section 552.022 of the Government Code, which 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:

...

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

Id. § 552.022(a)(3). Upon review, we find the information at issue does not consist of information in an account, contract, or voucher relating to the receipt or expenditure of funds by the district that is subject to section 552.022(a)(3). Therefore, the information at issue is not subject to section 552.022(a)(3). Accordingly, we will address the district's argument to withhold this information.

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.

...

(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.

Id. § 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). *See* ORD 551.

The district states, and provides documentation showing, prior to its receipt of the instant request, a lawsuit styled *One Allen Center v. Harris Co. Appraisal Dist.*, Cause No. 2019-5811a, was pending in the 334th Judicial District Court of Harris County, Texas. Therefore, we agree litigation was pending on the date the district received the present request for information. The district also states the information at issue pertains to the substance of the lawsuit claims. Based upon these representations and our review, we find the information at issue is related to the pending litigation. Therefore, we conclude the district may withhold the submitted information under section 552.103 of the Government Code.

Generally, however, once information has been obtained by all parties to the litigation though 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 pending 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,

James M. Graham
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JMG/jxd

Ref: ID# 923771

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)

cc: Third party
(w/o enclosures)