



May 30, 2002

Mr. Scott A. Durfee
General Counsel
Office of the District Attorney
Harris County
1201 Franklin Street, Suite 600
Houston, Texas 77002

OR2002-2930

Dear Mr. Durfee:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 163550.

The Harris County District Attorney's Office (the "D.A.'s Office") received two requests for all information pertaining to *State v. Yates*, cause numbers 880205 and 883590. You claim that the information is excepted under sections 552.101, 552.103, and 552.108 of the Government Code. We have considered your arguments and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.¹

First, we note that the submitted information includes documents that appear to have been filed with a court. Information filed with a court is generally a matter of public record and may not be withheld from disclosure. Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(17); *Star-Telegram, Inc. v. Walker*, 834 S.W.2d 54 (Tex. 1992). We have marked this information. Furthermore, you inform us that portions of the submitted videotapes were shown to the jury at trial. Thus, the D.A.'s Office must also release these portions of the videotapes.

Section 552.103 provides as follows:

¹We assume that 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.

(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.

The D.A.'s Office has the burden of providing relevant facts and documents to show that the section 552.103(a) exception is applicable in a particular situation. The test for meeting this burden is a showing that (1) litigation is pending or reasonably anticipated, and (2) the information at issue is related to that litigation. *University of Tex. Law Sch. v. Texas Legal Found.*, 958 S.W.2d 479, 481 (Tex. App.--Austin 1997, no pet.); *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 D.A.'s Office must meet both prongs of this test for information to be excepted under 552.103(a).

To establish that 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." Open Records Decision No. 452 at 4 (1986). Concrete evidence to support a claim that 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.² Open Records Decision No. 555 (1990); *see* Open Records Decision No. 518 at 5 (1989) (litigation must be "realistically contemplated"). On the other hand, this office has determined that 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).

The D.A.'s Office states that it received the first request for information on March 11, 2002. Further, you explain that Ms. Yates was found guilty and sentenced on March 18, 2002. Thus, the D.A.'s Office has shown that litigation was pending on the date that it received the

²In addition, this office has concluded that litigation was reasonably anticipated when the potential opposing party took the following objective steps toward litigation: filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, *see* Open Records Decision No. 336 (1982); hired an attorney who made a demand for disputed payments and threatened to sue if the payments were not made promptly, *see* Open Records Decision No. 346 (1982); and threatened to sue on several occasions and hired an attorney, *see* Open Records Decision No. 288 (1981).

first request for information. The D.A.'s Office states that it received the second request for information on March 27, 2002. In arguing that it reasonably anticipates litigation, the D.A.'s Office explains that Ms. Yates's attorneys announced on March 17, 2002, that she will appeal her convictions. Therefore, we agree that the D.A.'s Office reasonably anticipated litigation when it received the second request for information. After reviewing the submitted information, we conclude that it relates to the pending and anticipated litigation. Thus, the D.A.'s Office may withhold most of the information under section 552.103.

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. Open Records Decision Nos. 349 (1982), 320 (1982); *but see* Open Records Decision No. 579 (1990). Thus, information that has either been obtained from or provided to the opposing party in the anticipated litigation is not excepted from disclosure under section 552.103(a). The submitted information includes letters to and from Ms. Yates. Because the D.A.'s Office obtained the correspondence from Ms. Yates, the opposing party, the letters are not excepted under section 552.103. Further, the applicability of section 552.103(a) ends once the litigation has been concluded. Attorney General Opinion MW-575 (1982); Open Records Decision No. 350 (1982).

Ms. Yates's correspondence is protected by constitutional privacy under section 552.101 of the Government Code. Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." This section encompasses the right to privacy. The constitutional right to privacy protects two interests. Open Records Decision No. 600 at 4 (1992) (citing *Ramie v. City of Hedwig Village*, 765 F.2d 490 (5th Cir. 1985), *cert. denied*, 474 U.S. 1062 (1986)). The first is the interest in independence in making certain important decisions related to the "zones of privacy" recognized by the United States Supreme Court. Open Records Decision No. 600 at 4 (1992). The zones of privacy recognized by the United States Supreme Court are matters pertaining to marriage, procreation, contraception, family relationships, and child rearing and education. *See id.*

The second interest is the interest in avoiding disclosure of personal matters. The test for whether information may be publicly disclosed without violating constitutional privacy rights involves a balancing of the individual's privacy interests against the public's need to know information of public concern. *See* Open Records Decision No. 455 at 5-7 (1987) (citing *Fadjo v. Coon*, 633 F.2d 1172, 1176 (5th Cir. 1981)).

In Open Records Decision Nos. 428 (1985) and 430 (1985), we concluded that inmate visitor and mail logs which identify inmates and those who choose to visit or correspond with inmates are protected by constitutional law. We have reviewed the letters and conclude that the D.A.'s Office must withhold Ms. Yates's letters from disclosure pursuant to section 552.101 of the Government Code.

In summary, the D.A.'s Office must release any documents filed with a court and those portions of the videotapes that have been shown to the jury pursuant to section 552.022(a)(17). The D.A.'s Office must withhold Ms. Yates's correspondence under section 552.101 in conjunction with constitutional privacy. The remainder of the information is excepted under section 552.103.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records 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 records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at 877/673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.--Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the Texas Building and Procurement Commission at 512/475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. We note that a third party may challenge this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



Yen-Ha Le
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

YHL/sdk

Ref: ID# 163550

Enc. Submitted documents

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