



OFFICE *of the* ATTORNEY GENERAL
GREG ABBOTT

July 30, 2003

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

OR2003-5253

Dear Ms. Wright:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 185145.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for "any records" the department has concerning a particular motor vehicle accident. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.111, 552.117, and 552.130 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Initially, we note that the submitted information includes "Texas Peace Officer's Accident Report" forms. Section 550.065(b) of the Transportation Code states that it "applies only to information that is held by the [Department of Public Safety] or another governmental entity and relates to a motor vehicle accident reported under [chapter 552] or Section 601.004 [of the Transportation Code.]" This section states that, except as provided by subsection (c), accident reports are privileged and confidential. Section 550.065(c)(4) provides for release of accident reports to a person who provides two of the following three pieces of information: (1) the date of the accident, (2) the name of any person involved in the accident, and (3) the specific location of the accident. *See* Transp. Code § 550.065(c)(4). Under this provision, a governmental entity is required to release a copy of an accident report to a person who provides two or more pieces of information specified by the statute. *Id.* In this instance, the requestor has provided the department with two of the three pieces of information. Thus, you must release the submitted "Texas Peace Officer's Accident Report" forms to the requestor. Although you contend that portions of these reports are excepted under sections 552.117 and 552.130, the exceptions found in the Public Information Act do

not, as a general rule, apply to information that is made public by other statutes. *See* Open Records Decision No. 525 (1989) (statutory predecessor). Thus, you must release unredacted copies of these reports to the requestor.

As for the remaining submitted information, we note that it constitutes a completed report made of, for, or by the department, which is subject to section 552.022 of the Government Code. This section provides that “a completed report, audit, evaluation, or investigation made of, for, or by a governmental body,” is public and may not be withheld unless it is expressly confidential under other law or excepted from disclosure by section 552.108. Gov’t Code § 552.022(a)(1). You do not claim that the submitted information is excepted under section 552.108. Instead, you assert that the submitted information is protected by section 552.111. This section is a discretionary exception and does not constitute “other law” for purposes of section 552.022. Open Records Decision Nos. 677 at 8-9 (2002); *see* Open Records Decision No. 473 (1987) (governmental body may waive predecessor to section 552.111); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 522 (1989) (discretionary exceptions in general). However, the Texas Supreme Court has held that “[t]he Texas Rules of Civil Procedure and Texas Rules of Evidence are ‘other law’ within the meaning of section 552.022.” *See In re City of Georgetown*, 53 S.W.3d 328, 336 (Tex. 2001). This office has determined that when the work-product privilege is claimed for information that is subject to release under section 552.022, the proper analysis is whether the information at issue is excepted under Texas Rule of Civil Procedure 192.5 (work product). ORD 677 at 8-9. We will therefore consider whether the remaining submitted information is excepted under this rule or is protected under sections 552.117 and 552.130.

Rule 192.5 provides in part:

(a) Work Product Defined. Work product comprises:

(1) *material prepared* or mental impressions developed *in anticipation of litigation* or for trial *by or for a party* or a party’s representatives, *including* the party’s attorneys, consultants, sureties, indemnitors, insurers, *employees*, or agents; or

(2) a communication made in anticipation of litigation or for trial between a party and the party’s representatives or among a party’s representatives, including the party’s attorneys, consultants, sureties, indemnitors, insurers, employees, or agents.

TEX. R. CIV. P. 192.5(a) (emphasis added). Accordingly, in order to withhold work product from disclosure under Rule 192.5, a governmental body must demonstrate that the material, communication, or mental impression was created for trial or in anticipation of litigation. *Id.* To show that the information at issue was created in anticipation of litigation, a

governmental body must demonstrate that (1) a reasonable person would have concluded from the totality of the circumstances surrounding the investigation that there was a substantial chance that litigation would ensue, and (2) the party resisting discovery believed in good faith that there was a substantial chance that litigation would ensue and conducted the investigation for the purpose of preparing for such litigation. *See National Tank v. Brotherton*, 851 S.W.2d 193, 207 (Tex. 1993). A “substantial chance” of litigation does not mean a statistical probability, but rather “that litigation is more than merely an abstract possibility or unwarranted fear.” *Id.* at 204. Information that meets the work product test is confidential under Rule 192.5 provided the information does not fall within the purview of the exceptions to the privilege enumerated in rule 192.5(c). *Pittsburgh Corning Corp. v. Caldwell*, 861 S.W.2d 423, 427 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1993, no writ).

In this instance, you state that “the primary motivating purpose for generating [the submitted information] is to prepare for potential tort litigation involving [the department].” Furthermore, the submitted documents contain a notation that a third party “appears to be negligent for [the department’s] damages” and a recommendation that the department give notice of its claim to this driver. Having considered your representations, your arguments, and the submitted information, we agree that the remaining information constitutes privileged work product that may be withheld under Rule 192.5.

In summary, the department must release unredacted copies of the “Texas Peace Officer’s Accident Report” forms. The remaining submitted information may be withheld pursuant to Rule 192.5. Because of our ruling on these issues, we need not address your remaining arguments.

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

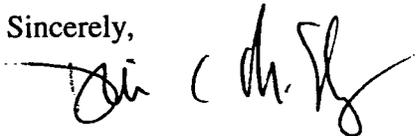
records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these 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 Dep't of Pub. 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,



Denis C. McElroy
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

DCM/sdk

Ref: ID# 185145

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Ms. Meredith L. Kennedy
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(w/o enclosures)