



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS  
GREG ABBOTT

September 12, 2003

Ms. Pamela Smith  
Assistant General Counsel  
Texas Department of Public Safety  
P.O. Box 4087  
Austin, Texas 78773-0001

OR2003-6420

Dear Ms. Smith:

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# 187648.

The Department of Public Safety (the "Department") received a request for information concerning inspections, complaints, and citations pertaining to a specified company. You inform us that the Department is releasing the relevant records with the exception of one complaint. You assert the submitted document is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We reviewed the information you submitted and considered the exception you claim.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." Texas courts have long recognized the informer's privilege, which the Act incorporates under section 552.101. *See Aguilar v. State*, 444 S.W.2d 935, 937 (Tex. Crim. App. 1969); *Hawthorne v. State*, 10 S.W.2d 724, 725 (Tex. Crim. App. 1928). It protects from disclosure the identities of persons who report activities over which the governmental body has criminal or quasi-criminal law-enforcement authority, provided that the subject of the information does not already know the informer's identity. Open Records Decision Nos. 515 at 3 (1988), 208 at 1-2 (1978). The informer's privilege protects the identities of individuals who report violations of statutes to the police or similar law-enforcement agencies, as well as those who report violations of statutes with civil or criminal penalties to "administrative officials having a duty of inspection or of law enforcement within their particular spheres." Open Records Decision No. 279 at 2 (1981) (citing Wigmore, Evidence, § 2374, at 767

(McNaughton rev. ed. 1961)). The report must be of a violation of a criminal or civil statute. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 582 at 2 (1990), 515 at 4-5 (1988).

To establish the applicability of the informer's privilege, you state that the complaint alleges violations of parts 393 and 395 of title 49 of the Code of Federal Regulations, federal safety regulations which the Department has adopted by reference. *See* Transp. Code § 644.051(a)(2)(c); 37 T.A.C. § 3.62. You explain that the Department's Motor Carrier Bureau enforces the laws and regulations governing the operation of trucking companies and commercial motor vehicles. Further, you inform us that a violation of a rule adopted under chapter 644 of the Transportation Code carries criminal and civil penalties. *See* Transp. Code §§ 644.151, .152.<sup>1</sup> You claim that because the complaint is handwritten, the complainant would be identifiable to anyone familiar with the company's employees, and thus, the Department should withhold the entire document to preserve the anonymity of the individual under the informer's privilege. Based on your representations and our review of the submitted document, we agree that the complainant is an informer, and therefore, the Department may withhold only the complainant's identifying information, which we have marked, under section 552.101 in conjunction with the informer's privilege.

Also, we note that the submitted document contains information subject to section 552.130 of the Government Code. This provision excepts from public disclosure information relating to a driver's license or a motor vehicle title or registration issued by an agency of this state. *See* Gov't Code § 552.130. Here, the submitted information contains a driver's license number and a class type, which we have marked, that the Department must withhold under section 552.130 of the Government Code.

In summary, the Department may withhold the complainant's identifying information, which we have marked, under section 552.101 in conjunction with the informer's privilege. The Department must withhold the motor vehicle records information under section 552.130 of the Government Code. The Department must release the remainder of the information to the requestor.

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

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<sup>1</sup> Though you cite to section 644.141 of the Transportation Code, we assume you intended to reference section 644.151.

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,



Christen Sorrell  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

CHS/seg

Ref: ID# 187648

Enc: Submitted documents

c: Mr. Phillip Mitchell  
Sturdisteel Company  
P.O. Box 2655  
Waco, Texas 76702-2655  
(w/o enclosures)