



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

January 21, 2004

Mr. Brad Norton
Assistant City Attorney
City of Austin - Law Department
P.O. Box 1088
Austin, Texas 78767-8845

OR2004-0450

Dear Mr. Norton:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 194549.

The City of Austin (the "City") received a request for information regarding certain bid proposals submitted to the city in November, 1994 for work related to the Holly Power Plant. You state that some responsive information will be released. You indicate that some of the requested information does not exist. *See Economic Opportunities Dev. Corp. v. Bustamante*, 562 S.W.2d 266 (Tex. Civ. App.—San Antonio 1978, writ dismissed); Open Records Decision No. 452 at 3 (1986) (governmental body not required to disclose information that did not exist at time request was received). Subsequently, the requestor submitted a clarified request for information relating to Austin Energy's own proposal to the city.¹ We note you have not submitted any information responsive to this clarified request for information regarding Austin Energy's own proposal, nor have you raised any exceptions to its disclosure. Accordingly, we assume you have released such information, to the extent it existed on the date of the city's receipt of this request. If not, you must release it immediately. *See Gov't Code §§ 552.006, .301, .302*; Open Records Decision No. 664 (2000) (concluding that section 552.221(a) requires that information not excepted from disclosure must be released as soon as possible under the circumstances). In regards to the original request for information, although the city takes no position as to whether some of the requested information is excepted from public disclosure, you believe that this request for information implicates the proprietary interests of the private parties that responded to the request for proposals. You notified the parties of this request for information and of their

¹ Although the requestor seeks information regarding the "Department of Energy," we understand the requestor to mean Austin Energy.

right to submit arguments to this office as to why the information should not be released.² You also submitted the private parties' proposals. We reviewed the information you submitted.

Initially, we address the city's obligations under section 552.301 of the Government Code. Pursuant to section 552.301(b), a governmental body must ask the attorney general for a decision as to whether requested information must be disclosed not later than the tenth business day after the date of receiving the written request for information. *See Gov't Code* § 552.301(b). Section 552.301(e) requires the governmental body to submit to the attorney general, not later than the fifteenth business day after the date of its receipt of the request, (1) written comments stating why the governmental body's claimed exceptions apply to the information that it seeks to withhold; (2) a copy of the written request for information; (3) a signed statement of the date on which the governmental body received the request, or evidence sufficient to establish that date; and (4) the specific information that the governmental body seeks to withhold or representative samples of the information if it is voluminous. *See id.* § 552.301(e)(1)(A)-(D). You acknowledge that the city has not complied with section 552.301 of the Government Code in requesting this decision.

Pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, a governmental body's failure to comply with section 552.301 results in the legal presumption that the information at issue is public and must be released. A governmental body must release information presumed public under section 552.302, unless it demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information. *See Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381-82 (Tex. App.—Austin 1990, no writ) (governmental body must make compelling demonstration to overcome presumption of openness pursuant to statutory predecessor to Gov't Code § 552.302); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). Normally, a compelling interest exists when some other source of law makes the information confidential or third party interests are at stake. *See* Open Records Decision No. 150 at 2 (1977). Because the city indicates that release of the submitted information may implicate third party interests, which can provide a compelling reason to overcome the presumption of openness, we will address this issue.

We note that an interested third party is allowed ten business days after the date of its receipt of the governmental body's notice under section 552.305(d) to submit its reasons, if any, as to why information relating to that party should be withheld from public disclosure. *See* Gov't Code § 552.305(d)(2)(B). As of the date of this letter, none of the third parties that you notified has submitted any reasons explaining why the city should not release their information. Therefore, we have no basis from which to conclude that any of these third parties have a protected proprietary interest in the submitted information. *See* Gov't Code § 552.110(b) (to prevent disclosure of commercial or financial information, party must show

² See Gov't Code § 552.305(d); Open Records Decision No. 542 (1990) (statutory predecessor to Gov't Code § 552.305 permits governmental body to rely on interested third party to raise and explain applicability of exception to disclosure under Gov't Code ch. 552 in certain circumstances).

by specific factual or evidentiary material, not conclusory or generalized allegations, that it actually faces competition and that substantial competitive injury would likely result from disclosure); Open Records Decision Nos. 552 at 5 (1990) (party must establish *prima facie* case that information is trade secret), 542 at 3 (1990). Therefore, the city may not withhold the submitted information on the basis of any third party proprietary interest. Accordingly, as you assert no other exceptions for our consideration, the city must release the submitted 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 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,



Debbie K. Lee
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

DKL/seg

Ref: ID# 194549

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Ms. Zelda Botha
2206 Haskell Street
Austin, Texas 78702
(w/o enclosures)

Southern Electric International
900 Ashwood Parkway, Suite 500
Atlanta, Georgia 30338-4780
(w/o enclosures)

United Cogen Corporation
39 Market Street, Suite 200
Salt Lake City, Utah 84101
(w/o enclosures)

Energy Initiatives
One Upper Pond Road
Parsippany, New Jersey 07054
(w/o enclosures)

Destech Energy
2500 City West Boulevard
Houston, Texas 77042
(w/o enclosures)

Tenneco Power Generation Company
P.O. Box 2511
Houston, Texas 77252-2511
(w/o enclosures)

TXU
1601 Bryan Street
Dallas, Texas 75201
(w/o enclosures)