



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

GREG ABBOTT

July 13, 2005

Ms. Myrna S. Reingold  
Galveston County  
4127 Shearn Moody Plaza  
123 Rosenberg  
Galveston, Texas 77550-1454

OR2005-06197

Dear Ms. Reingold:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 231153.

The Galveston County Health District (the "district") received a request for information pertaining to a complaint against the requestor, procedures for investigating complaints, and ordinances regarding kennel regulations. The district has released the requested information except for the complainant's identifying information, which it asserts is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with the common-law informer's privilege and Texas Rule of Evidence 508. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

The district acknowledges it failed to comply with section 552.301(b) of the Government Code. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(b) (agency required to submit request for decision and assert exceptions within ten business days of receiving request for information). Furthermore, the district also failed to comply with section 552.301(e). *See id.* 552.301(e) (agency required to submit certain items within fifteen business days of receiving request for information). 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 is public and must be released. Information that is presumed public must be released unless a governmental body demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information to overcome this presumption. *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). The presumption that information is public under section 552.302 can be overcome by demonstrating that the information is confidential by law or that third party interests are at stake. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 630 at 3 (1994), 325 at 2 (1982).

Section 552.101, which encompasses “information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision,” generally can provide a compelling reason to overcome the presumption of openness. *See* Open Records Decision No. 630 (1994). The informer’s privilege, however, is held by the governmental body and serves to protect its interests in preserving the flow of information to the governmental body. *See Roviario v. United States*, 353 U.S. 53, 59 (1957). Accordingly, a governmental body is free to waive the informer’s privilege and release information for which it otherwise could claim the exception. Open Records Decision No. 549 at 6 (1990). Thus, the informer’s privilege does not constitute a compelling reason to overcome the presumption of openness. We therefore determine that the information at issue may not be withheld pursuant to the informer’s privilege.

The district also claims the informer’s privilege under Texas Rule of Evidence 508. The Texas Supreme Court has held that the Texas Rules of Evidence are “other law” within the meaning of section 552.022 of the Government Code. *See In re City of Georgetown*, 53 S.W.3d 328 (Tex. 2001); Gov’t Code § 552.022(a) (enumerates categories of information that are public unless confidential under “other law”). In this instance, however, section 552.022 is not applicable to the information that the district seeks to withhold under Rule 508. Thus, Rule 508 is inapplicable here and the district must release the highlighted information.

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, upon receiving this ruling, the governmental body

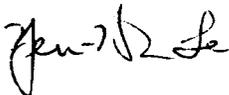
will either release the public records promptly pursuant to section 552.221(a) of the Government Code or file a lawsuit challenging this ruling pursuant to section 552.324 of the Government Code. If the governmental body fails to do one of these things, then the requestor should report that failure to 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); *Tex. 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 ten calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



Yen-Ha Le  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

YHL/sdk

Ref: ID# 231153

Enc: Submitted documents

c: Ms. Carolyn A. O'Leary  
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(w/o enclosures)