



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

November 3, 2005

Sheriff Don Michael
Office of the Sheriff
San Augustine County
219 North Harrison
San Augustine, Texas 75972

OR2005-09963

Dear Sheriff Michael:

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# 235651.

The County of San Augustine (the "county") received a request for all correspondence regarding a specific person. We understand you to assert that the requested information is subject to an expunction order and section 552.107(2) of the Government Code. We have considered your arguments.

Initially, we address the issue of whether a petition for expunction of the requested records has been granted by the court. Articles 55.01 through 55.05 of the Code of Criminal Procedure provide for the expunction of criminal records in certain limited circumstances. Article 55.03 prescribes the effect of an expunction order and provides:

When the order of expunction is final:

- (1) the release, maintenance, dissemination, or use of the expunged records and files for any purpose is prohibited;
- (2) except as provided in Subdivision (3) of this article, the person arrested may deny the occurrence of the arrest and the existence of the expunction order; and
- (3) the person arrested or any other person, when questioned under oath in a criminal proceeding about an arrest for which

the records have been expunged, may state only that the matter in question has been expunged.

Crim. Proc. Code art. 55.03.¹ Article 55.04 imposes sanctions for violations of an expunction order and provides in relevant part:

Sec. 1. A person who acquires knowledge of an arrest while an officer or employee of the state or of any agency or other entity of the state . . . and who knows of an order expunging the records and files relating to that arrest commits an offense if he knowingly releases, disseminates, or otherwise uses the records or files.

Id. art. 55.04, § 1. This office has previously determined that the expunction statute prevails over the Act. *See* Open Records Decision No. 457 at 2 (1987) (governmental body prohibited from releasing or disseminating arrest records subject to expunction order, as “those records are not subject to public disclosure under the [Act]”).

However, you do not inform us, nor does the information you have provided to us reveal, whether or when any petition for expunction was granted. Nevertheless, to the extent that an order for expunction of any of the requested information has been granted, then article 55.03 of the Code of Criminal Procedure prohibits the county from releasing any such information to the requestor. In the event that no expunction order has been entered that applies to the requested records, we will address your remaining argument.

Section 552.107(2) of the Government Code excepts from required public disclosure information if “a court by order has prohibited disclosure of the information.” You state that a judge has verbally ordered you not to release the information at issue. However, as you have not provided us with the terms of the order at issue, we find you have failed to demonstrate that the requested information is protected under section 552.107(2).

In summary, to the extent that an order for the expunction of any of the requested information has been granted, article 55.03 of the Code of Criminal Procedure prohibits the county from releasing any such information to the requestor. To the extent that such an order has not been granted, the county must release the requested 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

¹As amended by Act of May 27, 2005, 79th Leg., R.S., ch. 790, § 1, 2005 Tex. Session Law Serv. 2717.

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); *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 Office of the Attorney General 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. 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,



Michael A. Lehmann
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

MAL/sdk

Ref: ID# 235651

c: Mr. E. M. Farrell
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