



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS  
GREG ABBOTT

February 8, 2006

Mr. James Downes  
Assistant County Attorney  
Harris County  
2525 Holly Hall, Suite 190  
Houston, Texas 77054

OR2006-01298

Dear Mr. Downes:

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# 241979.

The Harris County Hospital District (the "district") received a request for a specified section of all proposals submitted to the district in response to its request for proposal ("RFP") to provide vision insurance and managed care coverage for employees of the district. You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.104, and 552.137 of the Government Code. Additionally, you claim that this information may be subject to third party proprietary interests. You indicate that you notified the third parties that submitted proposals in response to the RFP at issue of the request and of their opportunity to submit comments to this office. *See Gov't Code* § 552.305 (permitting interested third party to submit to attorney general reasons why requested information should not be released); Open Records Decision No. 542 (1990) (determining that statutory predecessor to section 552.305 permits governmental body to rely on interested third party to raise and explain applicability of exception to disclosure in certain circumstances). You have submitted documentation indicating you notified the following third parties of the request: Aetna Life Insurance Company ("Aetna"), Block Vision of Texas, Inc. ("Block Vision"), CompBenefits ("CompBenefits"), OptiCare Vision Plan ("OptiCare"), Spectera Insurance Company, Inc. ("Spectera"), and Vision Service Plan ("VSP"). We have received comments submitted by or on behalf of Block Vision,

CompBenefits, Spectera, and VSP. We have considered the submitted arguments and reviewed the submitted information.

Section 552.104 excepts from disclosure “information that, if released, would give advantage to a competitor or bidder.” Gov’t Code § 552.104. The purpose of section 552.104 is to protect a governmental body’s interests in competitive bidding situations, including where the governmental body may wish to withhold information in order to obtain more favorable offers. *See* Open Records Decision No. 592 at 8 (1991). Section 552.104 requires a showing of some actual or specific harm in a particular competitive situation; a general allegation that a bidder will gain an unfair advantage will not suffice. Open Records Decision No. 541 at 4 (1990). However, section 552.104 does not except from disclosure information relating to competitive bidding situations once a contract has been executed. Open Records Decision Nos. 306 (1982), 184 (1978).

You state that the district has not yet executed a contract on the subject matter of the RFP at issue. You further state that the terms of such contract are still subject to negotiation. Based upon your representations, we conclude that the submitted information may be withheld from the requestor under section 552.104.<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup>As our ruling on this issue is dispositive, we need not address the remaining submitted arguments against disclosure.

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,



Ramsey A. Abarca  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

RAA/krl

Ref: ID# 241979

Enc. Submitted documents

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