ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

February 27, 2006

Mr. Joseph T. Longoria
Perdue, Brandon, Fielder, Collins & Mott, L.L.P.
1235 North Loop West, Suite 600
Houston, Texas 7700

OR2006-01907

Dear Mr. Longoria:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code, the Public Information Act (the "Act"). Your request was assigned ID# 243158.

The Cottle County Appraisal District (the "district"), which you represent, received a request for "[all] detailed mineral appraisal data and [all] supporting mineral appraisal data for the 2004 and 2005 appraisal years." You state that you will release some of the requested information. You also state that you have no information responsive to a portion of the request. You claim that a portion of the requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim. We have also considered comments submitted by the requestor. *See* Gov't Code § 552.304 (providing that interested party may submit comments stating why information should or should not be released).

Initially, we must address the district's obligations under the Act. Pursuant to section 552.301(b), a governmental body that receives a request for information that it wishes to withhold must ask for the attorney general's decision and state the exceptions that apply within ten business days after receiving the request. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(a), (b). Within fifteen business days of receiving the request, the governmental body must submit to this office (1) written comments stating the reasons why the stated exceptions apply that would allow the information to be withheld, (2) a copy of the written request for information, (3) a signed statement or sufficient evidence showing the date the governmental body received the written request, and (4) a copy of the specific information requested or

representative samples, labeled to indicate which exceptions apply to which parts of the documents. *Id.* § 552.301(e)(1)(A)-(D). You inform us that the district received this request on or about August 26, 2005, but you did not request a decision from this office until December 16, 2005. Furthermore, you failed to submit copies or representative samples of the specific information that you wish to withhold. Consequently, you failed to comply with section 552.301.

Pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, a governmental body's failure to comply with the procedural requirements of section 552.301 results in the legal presumption that the requested 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* Gov't Code § 552.302; *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 section 552.302); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). Normally, a compelling reason to withhold information exists where some other source of law makes the information confidential or where third party interests are at stake. *See* Open Records Decision No. 150 at 2 (1977).

Because section 552.101 of the Government Code is designed to protect information that is confidential by law, this section can provide compelling reasons for withholding information. However, as you have not submitted for our review the information you seek to withhold, or a representative sample thereof, we have no basis for finding any such information confidential. Thus, we have no choice but to order the district to release the information at issue. If you believe such information is confidential and may not lawfully be released, you must challenge this ruling in court as outlined below.

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).

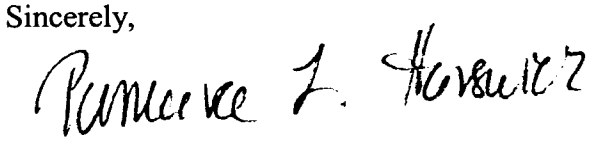
If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, upon receiving this ruling, the governmental body will either release the public records 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); *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,



Tamara L. Harswick
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

TLH/sdk

Ref: ID# 243158

c: Mr. Neil Job
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