ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

April 20, 2006

Ms. Katie Lentz
Open Records
Williamson County
508 South Rock Street
Georgetown, Texas 78626

OR2006-03996

Dear Ms. Lentz:

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# 246977.

The Williamson County Sheriff's Office (the "sheriff") received a request for case number C05-07-1961. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101 through 552.147 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim.

Pursuant to section 552.301 of the Government Code, a governmental body has certain procedural obligations when it receives a written request for information that it wishes to withhold. Under section 552.301(e), a governmental body is required to submit to this office within fifteen business days of receiving an open records request (1) general 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. Gov't Code § 552.301(e)(1)(A)-(D). You state that the sheriff's office received the request for information on February 1, 2006. Thus, the fifteen-business-day deadline to comply with section 552.301(e) was February 23, 2006. However, as of the date of this letter you have not submitted a copy or representative sample of the requested information, nor written comments stating the reasons why the exceptions that you raised would allow the information to be withheld. Accordingly, we conclude that you have failed to comply with section 552.301 with respect to this information.

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 information is public. Information that is presumed public must be released unless a governmental body demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information to overcome this presumption. *Id.* § 552.302; *see also 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); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). Generally, 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. Open Records Decision No. 150 at 2 (1977). In this instance, you have waived the discretionary exceptions you raised. See Open Records Decision No. 522 (1989) (discretionary exceptions in general). Accordingly, the requested information may not be withheld on any of these bases. Furthermore, by failing to submit any information for our review, we have no basis for finding it confidential under the claimed mandatory exceptions. Thus, we have no choice but to order the sheriff to release the responsive information in accordance with section 552.302 of the Government Code. If you believe the information is confidential and may not lawfully be released, the sheriff must challenge the 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,

Cindy Nettles
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

CN/er

Ref: ID# 246977

c: Ms. Cynthia Gialluca
25007 Ranch Road
Lender, Texas 78641