



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

October 5, 2006

Ms. M. Ann Montgomery
Assistant Ellis County & District Attorney
Ellis County and District Attorney
1201 North Highway 77, Suite 104
Waxahachie, Texas 75165-7832

OR2006-11638

Dear Ms. Montgomery:

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# 261178.

The Ellis County and District Attorney (the "district attorney") received a request for all records relating to a specific incident. You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.103, 552.108, and 552.130 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Initially, we must address the district attorney's obligations under the Act. Pursuant to section 552.301(b) of the Government Code, a governmental body 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(b)*. The district attorney states that it received the request for information on July 14, 2006. You were required to request a decision from this office by July 28, 2006. Instead, you requested a decision on July 31, 2006. Consequently, you failed to request a decision within the ten business day period mandated by section 552.301(b) of the Government Code.

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 unless the governmental body demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information from disclosure. *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). Sections 552.103 and 552.108 are discretionary exceptions and, as such, do not generally provide compelling reasons to withhold information. *See Dallas Area Rapid Transit v. Dallas Morning News*, 4 S.W.3d 469, 475-76 (Tex. App.—Dallas 1999, no pet.) (governmental body may waive section 552.103); Open Records Decision No. 177 (1977) (governmental body may waive statutory predecessor to section 552.108); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary exceptions generally). Thus, the district attorney may not withhold any of the submitted information under section 552.103 or section 552.108 of the Government Code. Generally, a compelling reason exists when third party interests are at stake or when information is confidential under other law. Open Records Decision No. 150 (1977). Because sections 552.101 and 552.130 can provide compelling reasons to withhold information, we will address your arguments concerning these exceptions.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure “information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision.” Gov’t Code § 552.101. This section encompasses information protected by other statutes. Section 261.201(a) of the Family Code provides as follows:

(a) The following information is confidential, is not subject to public release under Chapter 552, Government Code, and may be disclosed only for purposes consistent with this code and applicable federal or state law or under rules adopted by an investigating agency:

- (1) a report of alleged or suspected abuse or neglect made under this chapter and the identity of the person making the report; and
- (2) except as otherwise provided in this section, the files, reports, records, communications, and working papers used or developed in an investigation under this chapter or in providing services as a result of an investigation.

Fam. Code § 261.201(a). Here, you state that the submitted information was used or developed in an investigation of alleged or suspected child abuse. *See id.* § 261.001(1) (defining “abuse” for the purposes of chapter 261 of the Family Code). Thus, based on your representations and our review, we find that the information is within the scope of section 261.201 of the Family Code. You have not indicated that the district attorney has adopted a rule that governs the release of this type of information; therefore, we assume that no such regulation exists. Given that assumption, the district attorney must withhold the submitted information in its entirety under section 552.101 of the Government Code in

conjunction with section 261.201 of the Family Code. *See* Open Records Decision No. 440 at 2 (1986) (predecessor statute).¹

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.

¹Because our ruling is dispositive, we need not address your remaining argument.

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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jaclyn N. Thompson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jaclyn N. Thompson
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JNT/dh

Ref: ID# 261178

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Ms. Debbie Garner
6086 NE County Road 101
Powell, Texas 75153
(w/o enclosures)