



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

November 13, 2006

Ms. Sharon Alexander
Texas Department of Transportation
Dewitt C. Greer State Highway Bldg.
125 East 11th Street
Austin, Texas 78701-2483

OR2006-13409

Dear Ms. Alexander:

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# 264470.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for six categories of information pertaining to the approval and construction of State Highway 99. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.111 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.¹

Initially, we note that the submitted information includes completed reports made of, for, or by the department. Section 552.022 of the Government Code provides that "a completed report, audit, evaluation, or investigation made of, for, or by a governmental body" constitutes "public information . . . not excepted from required disclosure . . . unless . . . expressly confidential under other law" or excepted from disclosure under section 552.108 of the Government Code. Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(1).

¹We assume that the "representative sample" of records submitted to this office is truly representative of the requested records as a whole. See Open Records Decision Nos. 499 (1988), 497 (1988). This open records letter does not reach, and therefore does not authorize the withholding of, any other requested records to the extent that those records contain substantially different types of information than that submitted to this office.

You do not contend that section 552.108 applies in this instance and instead argue that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.111 of the Government Code. However, section 552.111 is a discretionary exception and, therefore, is not other law for purposes of section 552.022. *See* Open Records Decision No. 473 (1987) (statutory predecessor to section 552.111 may be waived); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 522 (1989) (discretionary exceptions in general). Thus, the completed reports in Exhibit B may not be withheld pursuant to this exception. You also contend, however, that this information is confidential under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code.

Section 409 provides as follows:

Notwithstanding any other provision of law, reports, surveys, schedules, lists, or data compiled or collected for the purpose of identifying [sic] evaluating, or planning the safety enhancement of potential accident sites, hazardous roadway conditions, or railway-highway crossings, pursuant to sections 130, 144, and 152 of this title or for the purpose of developing any highway safety construction improvement project which may be implemented utilizing Federal-aid highway funds shall not be subject to discovery or admitted into evidence in a Federal or State court proceeding or considered for other purposes in any action for damages arising from any occurrence at a location mentioned or addressed in such reports, surveys, schedules, lists, or data.

23 U.S.C. § 409. Federal courts have determined that section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code excludes from evidence data compiled for purposes of highway and railroad crossing safety enhancement and construction for which a state receives federal funding, in order to facilitate candor in administrative evaluations of highway safety hazards and to prevent federally-required record-keeping from being used for purposes of private litigation. *See Harrison v. Burlington N. R.R.*, 965 F.2d 155, 160 (7th Cir. 1992); *Robertson v. Union Pac. R.R.*, 954 F.2d 1433, 1435 (8th Cir. 1992). We agree that section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code is other law for purposes of section 552.022(a) of the Government Code. *See In re City of Georgetown*, 53 S.W.3d 328 (Tex. 2001); *see also Pierce County v. Guillen*, 123 S.Ct. 720 (2003) (upholding constitutionality of section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code, relied upon by county in denying request under state's Public Disclosure Act).

You state that the information in Exhibit B “was created for the purpose of identifying and evaluating hazards on public roads.” You further inform us that State Highway 99 is “part of the National Highway System under 23 U.S.C. §103 and therefore is a federal-aid highway within the meaning of 23 U.S.C. §409. Therefore, we conclude that the department may withhold the documents in Exhibit B pursuant to section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code.

We next address your section 552.111 claim for the remaining information, which is not subject to section 552.022. Section 552.111 excepts from disclosure “an interagency or intraagency memorandum or letter that would not be available by law to a party in litigation with the agency.” Section 552.111 encompasses the deliberative process privilege. *See* Open Records Decision No. 615 at 2 (1993). In Open Records Decision No. 615, this office reexamined the predecessor to the section 552.111 exception in light of the decision in *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ), and held that section 552.111 excepts only those internal communications consisting of advice, recommendations, and opinions reflecting the policymaking processes of the governmental body. *See City of Garland v. Dallas Morning News*, 22 S.W.3d 351, 364 (Tex. 2000); *see also Arlington Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Tex. Attorney Gen.*, 37 S.W.3d 152 (Tex. App.—Austin, 2001, no pet.). The purpose of section 552.111 is “to protect from public disclosure advice and opinions on policy matters and to encourage frank and open discussion within the agency in connection with its decision-making processes.” *Austin v. City of San Antonio*, 630 S.W.2d 391, 394 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1982, writ ref’d n.r.e.).

An agency’s policymaking functions do not encompass internal administrative or personnel matters; disclosure of information relating to such matters will not inhibit free discussion among agency personnel as to policy issues. *See* Open Records Decision No. 615 at 5-6. A governmental body’s policymaking functions do include administrative and personnel matters of broad scope that affect the governmental body’s policy mission. *See* Open Records Decision No. 631 at 3 (1995). Further, a preliminary draft of a policymaking document that has been released or is intended for release in final form is excepted from disclosure in its entirety under section 552.111 because such a draft necessarily represents the advice, recommendations, or opinions of the drafter as to the form and content of the final document. *See* Open Records Decision No. 559 at 2 (1990). Section 552.111 does not protect facts and written observations of facts and events that are severable from advice, opinions, and recommendations. *See* Open Records Decision No. 615 at 5. But, if factual information is so inextricably intertwined with material involving advice, opinion, or recommendation as to make severance of the factual data impractical, the factual information also may be withheld under section 552.111. *See* Open Records Decision No. 313 at 3 (1982).

You inform us that Exhibit C consists of preliminary documents and notes pertaining to drafts, which contain internal communications between department employees, consisting of advice, recommendations, and opinions that reflect the deliberations and policymaking process of the department. Based upon your representations and our review of the information located in Exhibit C, we agree that a portion of the information you seek to withhold under section 552.111 consists of advice, opinions, and recommendations regarding policymaking matters of the department. *See* Open Records Decision No. 631 at 4 (1995). However, we find that the remainder of the information in Exhibit C is purely factual. Accordingly, the department may only withhold the information we have marked in Exhibit C pursuant to section 552.111 of the Government Code.

In summary, the department may withhold: (1) the documents in Exhibit B pursuant to section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code; and (2) the information we have marked in Exhibit C pursuant to section 552.111 of the Government Code. The department must release the remainder of 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 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alix K. Cornett". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Alix K. Cornett
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

AKC/krl

Ref: ID# 264470

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Mr. Dylan B. Russell
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(w/o enclosures)