



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

July 23, 2007

Ms. Cynthia Villarreal-Reyna
Legal & Compliance Division
Texas Department of Insurance
P. O. Box 149104
Austin, Texas 78714-9104

OR2007-09278

Dear Ms. Villarreal-Reyna:

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# 284600.

The Texas Department of Insurance (the "department") received a request for information related to investigations of five named title escrow officers. You state that most of the responsive information has been released¹, but claim that some of the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.130, 552.136 and 552.137 of the Government Code. You inform us that you will withhold some responsive information in accordance with a previous determination issued to the department. *See* Open Records Decision No. 640 (1996) (providing that information obtained by department during course of examination is confidential by law); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 673 (2001) (criteria of previous determination regarding specific categories of information). We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted representative sample information.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.

Initially, you acknowledge that you failed to meet the deadlines prescribed by section 552.301 of the Government Code in requesting an open records decision from this office. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(b), (e). 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 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 Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381-82 (Tex. App.—Austin 1990, no writ) (holding that a governmental body must make a compelling demonstration to overcome the presumption of openness pursuant to the statutory predecessor of section 552.302); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). In order to overcome the presumption that the requested information is public, a governmental body must provide compelling reasons why the information should not be disclosed. *Hancock*, 797 S.W.2d at 381. Because sections 552.101, 552.130, 552.136, and 552.137 can provide compelling reasons to withhold information, we will consider your arguments under these sections.

Section 552.101 excepts from public disclosure “information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision.” Gov't Code § 552.101. This exception encompasses information that other statutes make confidential. The submitted information contains W-2 forms. Prior decisions of this office have held that section 6103(a) of title 26 of the United States Code renders tax return information confidential. *See* Attorney General Opinion H-1274 (1978) (tax returns); Open Records Decision Nos. 600 (1992) (W-4 forms), 226 (1979) (W-2 forms). Tax return information is defined as data furnished to or collected by the Internal Revenue Service with respect to the determination of possible existence of liability of any person under title 26 of the United States Code for any tax. *See* 26 U.S.C. § 6103(b). The submitted W-2 forms constitute tax return information that must be withheld under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with federal law.

You claim that the marked employer account numbers are excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 as confidential wage information under sections 603.2 and 603.4 of title 20 of the Code of Federal Regulations. In Open Records Decision No. 599 (1992), this office determined that federal regulations prohibit the disclosure of “wage information” in the files of a state unemployment compensation agency, except for disclosure to an authorized requesting agency under certain circumstances. “Wage information” means “information in the records of a State [unemployment compensation] agency [and includes] the Federal employer identification number of the employer” reporting wages under a state unemployment compensation law. *See* 20 C.F.R. § 603.2(k); *see also* ORD 599 at 6.

You assert that the type of employer account number at issue “may constitute a ‘state employer identification number’ within the definition of ‘wage information.’” However, the confidentiality provision of section 603.4 applies to “States and State [unemployment compensation] agencies.” *See* 20 C.F.R. §§ 603.1, 603.2(f) and (g). You do not demonstrate how this provision is applicable to the department. As such, we find that the employer

account numbers at issue are not made confidential by section 603.4 of title 20 of the Code of Federal Regulations, and they therefore may not be withheld under section 552.101 on that basis.

You next claim that social security numbers contained in the submitted records are confidential under section 59.001 of the Occupations Code, which provides as follows:

The social security number of an applicant for or holder of a license, certificate of registration, or other legal authorization issued by a licensing agency to practice in a specific occupation or profession that is provided to the licensing agency is confidential and not subject to disclosure under Chapter 552, Government Code.

Occ. Code § 59.001. You indicate that the social security numbers contained in the submitted documents were obtained in connection with the issuance of an occupational or professional license. Based on this representation, we conclude that the social security numbers you have marked are confidential under section 59.001 of the Occupations Code and thus must be withheld from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code.

Section 552.101 also encompasses the doctrine of common law privacy, which protects information if (1) the information contains highly intimate or embarrassing facts the publication of which would be highly objectionable to a reasonable person, and (2) the information is not of legitimate concern to the public. *Indus. Found. v. Tex. Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 685 (Tex. 1976). The type of information considered intimate and embarrassing by the Texas Supreme Court in *Industrial Foundation* included information relating to sexual assault, pregnancy, mental or physical abuse in the workplace, illegitimate children, psychiatric treatment of mental disorders, attempted suicide, and injuries to sexual organs. *See id.* at 683. This office has found that the following types of information are excepted from required public disclosure under constitutional or common law privacy: some kinds of medical information or information indicating disabilities or specific illnesses, *see* Open Records Decision Nos. 470 (1987) (illness from severe emotional and job-related stress), 455 (1987) (prescription drugs, illnesses, operations, and physical handicaps); and personal financial information not relating to the financial transaction between an individual and a governmental body, *see* Open Records Decision Nos. 600 (1992), 545 (1990). Accordingly, the department must withhold the information you have marked, and the additional information we have marked, under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common law privacy.

We note that section 552.117 of the Government Code may also be applicable to some of the submitted information. Section 552.117(a)(1) excepts from disclosure the home addresses and telephone numbers, social security numbers, and family member information of current or former officials or employees of a governmental body who request that this information be kept confidential under section 552.024. Whether a particular piece of information is protected by section 552.117 must be determined at the time the request for it is made. *See*

Open Records Decision No. 530 at 5 (1989). Therefore, the department may only withhold information under section 552.117 on behalf of current or former officials or employees who made a request for confidentiality under section 552.024 prior to the date on which the request for this information was made. For those employees who timely elected to keep their personal information confidential, the department must withhold the employees' home addresses and telephone numbers, social security numbers, and any information that reveals whether these employees have family members pursuant to section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code. The department may not withhold this information under section 552.117 for those employees who did not make a timely election to keep the information confidential.

Next, section 552.130 provides in relevant part:

(a) Information is excepted from the requirement of Section 552.021 if the information relates to:

- (1) a motor vehicle operator's or driver's license or permit issued by an agency of this state; [or]
- (2) a motor vehicle title or registration issued by an agency of this state[.]

Gov't Code § 552.130(a)(1), (2). We agree that the department must withhold the information you have marked under section 552.130 of the Government Code.

Section 552.136 of the Government Code states that "[n]otwithstanding any other provision of this chapter, a credit card, debit card, charge card, or access device number that is collected, assembled, or maintained by or for a governmental body is confidential." Gov't Code § 552.136. We agree that the department must withhold the information you have marked under section 552.136 of the Government Code.

Next, the remaining information includes an e-mail address that is subject to section 552.137 of the Government Code. Section 552.137 excepts from disclosure "an e-mail address of a member of the public that is provided for the purpose of communicating electronically with a governmental body" unless the member of the public consents to its release or the e-mail address is of a type specifically excluded by subsection (c). See Gov't Code § 552.137(a)-(c). Section 552.137 does not apply to a government employee's work e-mail address because such an address is not that of the employee as a "member of the public," but is instead the address of the individual as a government employee. The e-mail address at issue does not appear to be of a type specifically excluded by section 552.137(c). You state that no member of the public has affirmatively consented to the release of any of the e-mail addresses at issue. Therefore, the department must withhold the e-mail address you have marked under section 552.137 of the Government Code.

In summary, the department must withhold the information marked under sections 1) 552.101 in conjunction with federal law, section 59.001 of the Occupations Code, and common law privacy; 2) 552.117, provided that a timely election was made; 3) 552.130; 4) 552.136; and 5) 552.137. The remaining submitted information must be released to the requestor.

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/mcf

Ref: ID# 284600

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Mr. Craig Jordan
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(w/o enclosures)