



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

January 28, 2008

Mr. Chris Jones
Senior Counsel
Texas Education Agency
1701 North Congress Avenue
Austin, Texas 78701

OR2008-01262

Dear Mr. Jones:

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# 300692.

The Texas Education Agency (the "agency") received a request for documents illustrating how to withdraw a pending complaint and the complaint submitted pertaining to a named individual.¹ You state that you have released some of the information to the requestor. You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.103 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Section 552.103 of the Government Code provides:

(a) Information is excepted from [required public disclosure] if it is information relating to litigation of a civil or criminal nature to which the state or a political subdivision is or may be a party or to which an officer or employee of the state or a political subdivision, as a consequence of the person's office or employment, is or may be a party.

¹The requested records are held by the agency because, effective September 1, 2005, all administrative functions, staff, and resources of the State Board for Educator Certification ("SBEC") were transferred to the agency.

...

(c) Information relating to litigation involving a governmental body or an officer or employee of a governmental body is excepted from disclosure under Subsection (a) only if the litigation is pending or reasonably anticipated on the date that the requestor applies to the officer for public information for access to or duplication of the information.

Gov't Code § 552.103(a), (c). The agency has the burden of providing relevant facts and documents to show that the section 552.103(a) exception is applicable in a particular situation. The test for meeting this burden is a showing that (1) litigation is pending or reasonably anticipated, and (2) the information at issue is related to that litigation. *Univ. of Tex. Law Sch. v. Tex. Legal Found.*, 958 S.W.2d 479, 481 (Tex. App.—Austin 1997, no pet.); *Heard v. Houston Post Co.*, 684S.W.2d 210, 212 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1984, writ ref'd n.r.e.); Open Records Decision No. 551 at 4 (1990). The agency must meet both prongs of this test for information to be excepted under 552.103(a).

To establish that litigation is reasonably anticipated, a governmental body must provide this office “concrete evidence showing that the claim that litigation may ensue is more than mere conjecture.” Open Records Decision No. 452 at 4 (1986). In the context of anticipated litigation by a governmental body, the concrete evidence must at least reflect that litigation is “realistically contemplated.” See Open Records Decision No. 518 at 5 (1989); see also Attorney General Opinion MW-575 (1982) (finding that investigatory file may be withheld from disclosure if governmental body attorney determines that it should be withheld pursuant to section 552.103 and that litigation is “reasonably likely to result”). Whether litigation is reasonably anticipated must be determined on a case-by-case basis. See Open Records Decision No. 452 at 4 (1986).

In this instance, you state that prior to the instant request, the Eanes Independent School District filed a written complaint with the agency against the requestor alleging that he abandoned his contract in violation of section 21.210(a) of the Education Code. See Educ. Code § 21.210(a). You inform us that the agency may sanction teachers pursuant to section 21.201(c) of the Education Code. See *id.* § 21.201(c); see also *id.* §§ 21.031(a), 21.041(b) (agency enforces standards of conduct for certified educators in Texas public schools); 19 T.A.C. §§ 249.4(a)(1), 249.15. You further explain that, since the requestor contests the underlying basis of the complaint, he may institute a contested case hearing by filing a request with the agency under chapter 19 of the Texas Administrative Code. See 19 T.A.C. § 249.18(a). You also explain that the agency’s contested cases are heard by the State Office of Administrative Hearings and are governed by the Administrative Procedure Act (the “APA”), chapter 2001 of the Government Code. See Educ. Code § 21.041(b)(7); Open Records Decision No. 588 (1991) (contested case under APA constitutes litigation for purposes of statutory predecessor to section 552.103). Based on your representations and our review, we determine that the agency reasonably anticipated

litigation on the date that it received this request for information. Furthermore, upon review of the information at issue, we find that the submitted information relates to the anticipated litigation. Accordingly, we conclude that section 552.103 is applicable to the submitted information, and the agency may withhold the submitted information pursuant to section 552.103.

We note, however, that once the information has been obtained by all parties to the pending litigation, no section 552.103(a) interest exists with respect to that information. Open Records Decision No. 349 at 2 (1982). We also note that the applicability of section 552.103(a) ends when the litigation has concluded. Attorney General Opinion MW-575 (1982) at 2; Open Records Decision Nos. 350 at 3 (1982), 349 at 2 (1982).

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 file suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such a challenge, 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 challenge 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, appearing to read 'Jessica J. Maloney', with a long, sweeping horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jessica J. Maloney
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JJM/jh

Ref: ID# 300692

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Ms. Dianna Pharr
2204 Westlake Drive
Austin, Texas 78746
(w/o enclosures)