



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS  
GREG ABBOTT

February 12, 2008

Mr. David M. Swope  
Assistant County Attorney  
Harris County Attorney's Office  
1019 Congress, 15<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Houston, Texas 77002

OR2008-02030

Dear Mr. Swope:

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# 306877.

The Harris County Fire Marshal's Office (the "fire marshal") received four requests for information relating to a specified fire investigation. You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.108 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and have reviewed the information you submitted.

We first note that some of the submitted information is subject to section 552.022 of the Government Code. Section 552.022 provides for required public disclosure of "information that is also contained in a public court record," unless the information is expressly confidential under other law. Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(17). Although you seek to withhold the information that is subject to section 552.022(a)(17) under section 552.108 of the Government Code, that section is a discretionary exception to disclosure that protects a governmental body's interests and may be waived. *See id.* § 552.007; Open Records Decision Nos. 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary exceptions generally), 177 at 3 (1977) (statutory predecessor to Gov't Code § 552.108 subject to waiver). As such, section 552.108 is not other law that makes information expressly confidential for the purposes of section 552.022(a)(17). Therefore, the information that is subject to section 552.022(a)(17) may not be withheld under section 552.108, and the fire marshal must release that information.

Section 552.108(a)(1) excepts from disclosure “[i]nformation held by a law enforcement agency or prosecutor that deals with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime . . . if . . . release of the information would interfere with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime[.]” Gov’t Code § 552.108(a)(1). A governmental body that claims an exception to disclosure under section 552.108 must reasonably explain how and why this exception is applicable to the information at issue. *See id.* § 552.301(e)(1)(A); *Ex parte Pruitt*, 551 S.W.2d 706 (Tex. 1977). You inform us, and have submitted an affidavit stating, that the submitted information is related to a pending criminal investigation. Based on your representation and the submitted affidavit, we conclude that section 552.108(a)(1) is generally applicable to the remaining information. *See Houston Chronicle Publ’g Co. v. City of Houston*, 531 S.W.2d 177 (Tex. Civ. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1975), *writ ref’d n.r.e. per curiam*, 536 S.W.2d 559 (Tex. 1976) (court delineates law enforcement interests that are present in active cases).

Section 552.108 does not except from disclosure “basic information about an arrested person, an arrest, or a crime.” Gov’t Code § 552.108(c). Section 552.108(c) refers to the basic front-page information held to be public in *Houston Chronicle*. *See* 531 S.W.2d at 186-88. This office has held that the following information constitutes basic information that must generally be released from a fire marshal’s investigative reports: the name of any investigator, the probable cause of the fire, the owner, occupant, location of the loss or incident, date and time of the incident, structural information, name and address of insuring company, amount of insurance involved, and the extent of the damage. *See* Open Records Decision No. 134 at 3 (1976). With the exception of the basic information that must be released, the fire marshal may withhold the remaining information under section 552.108(a)(1).

In summary: (1) the fire marshal must release the information that is subject to section 552.022(a)(17) of the Government Code; and (2) except for the basic information that must be released, the fire marshal may withhold the rest of the submitted information under section 552.108(a)(1) of the Government Code.

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).

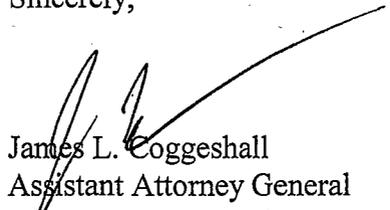
If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, upon receiving this ruling, the governmental body will either release the public records 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,



James L. Coggeshall  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

JLC/jh

Ref: ID# 306877

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Ms. Peggy O'Hare  
Houston Chronicle  
800 Texas Avenue  
Houston, Texas 77002  
(w/o enclosures)

Ms. Anesha Evans  
KHCW News  
7700 Westpark Drive  
Houston, Texas 77063  
(w/o enclosures)

Mr. Bill Langlois  
KHOU-TV  
1945 Allen Parkway  
Houston, Texas 77019  
(w/o enclosures)

Mr. Ralph Blumenthal  
New York Times  
1100 Louisiana Street  
Houston, Texas 77002  
(w/o enclosures)