



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

June 25, 2008

Ms. Jacqueline Maldonado
Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, Texas
P.O. Box 61429
Houston, Texas 77208

OR2008-08584

Dear Ms. Maldonado:

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# 313760.

The Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County (the "authority") received a request for four categories of information pertaining to a specified contract between the authority and Washington Group Transit Management Co. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.107, and 552.111 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim.

Section 552.301 of the Government Code prescribes the procedures that a governmental body must follow in asking this office to decide whether requested information is excepted from public disclosure. Pursuant to section 552.301(b), the 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(a), (b). Under section 552.301(e), a governmental body must submit to this office within fifteen business days of receiving an open records request written comments stating the reasons why the stated exceptions apply that would allow the information to be withheld, and a copy of the specific information requested or representative samples, labeled to indicate which exceptions apply to which parts of the documents. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(e)(1)(A), (D). You represent that the authority received the request at issue on April 1, 2008; however, you did not request a ruling from this office until April 16, 2008. Furthermore, as of the date of this ruling, you have not submitted arguments explaining why the stated exceptions apply or a copy of the specific

information requested or representative samples of it. Thus, the authority has failed to comply with the requirements mandated by section 552.301.

Pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, a governmental body's failure to comply with the 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 id.* § 552.302; *Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381-82 (Tex. App.—Austin 1990, no writ); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). A compelling reason exists when third-party interests are at stake or when information is confidential by law. Open Records Decision No. 150 (1977). Because the authority failed to comply with the requirements of the Act, the authority waived its claims under sections 552.107 and 552.111 of the Government Code, which are discretionary exceptions. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary exceptions generally), 663 at 5 (1999) (untimely request for a decision resulted in waiver of discretionary exceptions), 630 at 4-5 (1994) (governmental body may waive statutory predecessor to section 552.107), 470 at 7 (1987) (statutory predecessor to section 552.111 subject to waiver). Further, although the authority also raises section 552.101 of the Government Code, which is a mandatory exception to disclosure that generally may not be waived, the authority has not submitted any information for our review. Therefore, we have no basis for finding any information confidential. Thus, we have no choice but to order the authority to release the requested information. If you believe the information is confidential and may not lawfully be released, you must challenge the ruling in court as outlined below.

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). If the governmental body does not file suit over 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,



Reg Hargrove
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

RJH/eeg

Ref: ID# 313760

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Mr. Rod Sallee
Houston Chronicle
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(w/o enclosures)