ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

April 24, 2014

Ms. Sharon Alexander
Associate General Counsel
Texas Department of Transportation
125 East 11th Street
Austin, Texas 78701-2483

OR2014-06709

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# 520776.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received a request for information pertaining to two related accidents. You state the department is releasing some of the requested information. You claim the remaining 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]

Section 552.111 excepts from disclosure "[a]n interagency or intraagency memorandum or letter that would not be available by law to a party in litigation with the agency[.]" Gov't Code § 552.111. Section 552.111 encompasses information protected by civil discovery privileges. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 647 at 3 (1996), 251 at 2-4 (1980). You contend the information at issue is excepted from disclosure under section 552.111 because

[1]We 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.

it would be privileged from discovery under section 409 of title 23 of the United States Code. Section 409 provides:

> Notwithstanding any other provision of law, reports, surveys, schedules, lists, or data compiled or collected for the purpose of identifying, evaluating, or planning the safety enhancement of potential accident sites, hazardous roadway conditions, or railway-highway crossings, pursuant to sections 130, 144, and 148 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 stated section 409 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); *see also Pierce County v. Guillen*, 537 U.S. 129 (2003) (upholding constitutionality of 23 U.S.C. § 409, relied on by county in denying request under state's Public Disclosure Act).

You state the roadway at issue is part of the National Highway System under section 103 of title 23 of the United States Code, and is therefore a federal-aid highway within the meaning of section 409. You also state the information at issue was created for highway safety purposes. Furthermore, you state section 409 of title 23 would protect the information at issue from discovery in civil litigation. Based upon your representations and our review, we conclude the department may withhold the information at issue under section 552.111 of the Government Code.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular information 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 information or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For more information concerning those rights and responsibilities, please visit our website at http://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/open/orl_ruling_info.shtml, or call the Office of the Attorney General's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. Questions concerning the allowable charges for

providing public information under the Act may be directed to the Office of the Attorney General, toll free, at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,

Abigail T. Adams

Abigail T. Adams
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

ATA/eb

Ref: ID# 520776

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)