



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

May 19, 2015

Ms. Kelli A. N. Carlton
Attorney for Bastrop-Travis Counties Emergency Services District No. 1
The Carlton Law Firm, P.L.L.C.
2705 Bee Cave Road, Suite 200
Austin, Texas 78746

OR2015-09655

Dear Ms. Carlton:

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# 564247.

The Bastrop-Travis Counties Emergency Services District No. 1 and the Elgin Volunteer Fire Department, Inc. (collectively, the "district"), which you represent, received two requests from the same requestors for information pertaining to a specified motor vehicle collision, including (1) the readings from a "black box" monitoring device; (2) recordings, minutes of meetings, and conversations about the accident, including a specified meeting and any written or electronic communications; (3) any disciplinary write-ups involving two named individuals; and (4) any rules, by-laws, and procedures for drivers of emergency vehicles in the district. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.102, 552.103, and 552.111 of the Government Code.¹ We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

¹Although you also raise section 552.101 of the Government Code for the submitted information, you provide no arguments explaining how this exception applies to the information at issue. Therefore, we assume you no longer claim section 552.101 for the submitted information. *See* Gov't Code §§ 552.301, .302. Additionally, although you assert the submitted information is privileged under Texas Rule of Civil Procedure 192.5, we note the proper exception to raise when asserting the attorney work product privilege for information not subject to section 552.022 of the Government Code is section 552.111 of the Government Code. *See* Open Records Decision No. 677 (2002).

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure “information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision.” Gov’t Code § 552.101. Section 552.101 encompasses information subject to chapter 550 of the Transportation Code. Section 550.065 provides information that “relates to a motor vehicle accident reported under [chapter 550]” is privileged and for the confidential use of the Texas Department of Transportation or a local governmental agency of Texas that has use for the information for accident prevention purposes. Transp. Code § 550.065(a)-(b). Chapter 550 requires the creation of a written report when the accident resulted in injury to or the death of a person or damage to the property of any person to the apparent extent of \$1,000 or more. *Id.* §§ 550.061 (operator’s accident report), .062 (officer’s accident report). A governmental entity may release information related to a reported accident only in accordance with subsections (c) and (e). *Id.* § 550.065(c), (e). Section 550.065(c)(4) provides a governmental entity shall release such information to a person who provides two of the following three pieces of information: (1) the date of the accident, (2) the name of any person involved in the accident, and (3) the specific address or the highway or street where the accident occurred. *Id.* § 550.065(c)(4).

In *City of San Antonio v. Abbott*, the court of appeals considered the applicability of section 550.065 to certain information related to an accident. 432 S.W.3d 429 (Tex. App.—Austin 2014, pet. denied). The information at issue consisted of call-for-service and dispatch logs, and the requestor did not provide the requisite information pursuant to section 550.065(c)(4) to obtain the logs. The city argued the plain meaning of the phrase, “information that . . . relates to a motor vehicle accident” in section 550.065 includes *any* information pertaining to an accident reported under chapter 550, and thus, encompasses the information in its logs. Thus, the city contended the logs are confidential because the information relates to motor vehicle accidents reported under chapter 550. The court of appeals agreed with the city’s interpretation of section 550.065. The court held the phrase “relates to” is “very broad” and the Legislature’s use of the phrase “has the effect of broadening the scope of [s]ection 550.065 to render more than the actual accident reports confidential.” *Id.* at 432. Because the court found the language in section 550.065 to be unambiguous and encompass more than the actual accident report required to be filed under chapter 550, it concluded the city’s call-for-service and dispatch logs are confidential under section 550.065(b) of the Transportation Code. Relying on the court’s interpretation of the broad scope of section 550.065, we construe the converse to be true when the requestor does provide the requisite information pursuant to section 550.065(c)(4). Thus based on the court’s rationale, when a person provides two of the required pieces of information to a governmental entity, it must release any information that relates to a motor vehicle accident required to be reported under chapter 550. Such a release is not limited to the accident report itself. *Id.* at 433.

Here, the information in Exhibit C relates to a motor vehicle accident required to be reported under chapter 550 because it resulted in injury to or the death of a person or damage to the property of a person to the apparent extent of \$1,000 or more, and the requestors have

provided the district with the requisite information. Although the district asserts section 552.103 to withhold this information, information expressly made public by statute may not be withheld from the public under the general exceptions to public disclosure under the Act. *See, e.g.*, Open Records Decision Nos. 613 at 4 (1993) (exceptions in Act cannot impinge on statutory right of access to information), 451 (1986) (specific statutory right of access provisions overcome general exception to disclosure under the Act). Because section 552.103 is a general exception under the Act, the requestors' statutory access under section 550.065(c)(4) prevails and the district may not withhold Exhibit C under section 552.103 of the Government Code. However, we will address your argument under section 552.103 for the remaining information.

Section 552.103 of the Government Code provides, in pertinent part:

(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.

...

(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). A governmental body has the burden of providing relevant facts and documents to show the section 552.103(a) exception is applicable in a particular situation. The test for meeting this burden is a showing that (1) litigation was pending or reasonably anticipated on the date of the receipt of the request for information and (2) the information at issue is related to the pending or anticipated litigation. *Univ. of Tex. Law Sch. v. Tex. Legal Found.*, 958 S.W.2d 479, 481 (Tex. App.—Austin 1997, orig. proceeding); *Heard v. Houston Post Co.*, 684 S.W.2d 210, 212 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1984, writ ref'd n.r.e.); Open Records Decision No. 551 at 4 (1990). A governmental body must meet both prongs of this test for information to be excepted from disclosure under section 552.103(a).

To establish 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." *See* Open Records Decision No. 452 at 4 (1986). Concrete evidence to support a claim litigation is reasonably anticipated may include, for example, the governmental body's receipt of a letter containing a specific threat to sue the governmental body from an

attorney for a potential opposing party. *See* Open Records Decision No. 555 (1990); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 518 at 5 (1989) (litigation must be “realistically contemplated”). In addition, this office has concluded litigation was reasonably anticipated when the potential opposing party hired an attorney who made a demand for disputed payments and threatened to sue if the payments were not made promptly, or when an individual threatened to sue on several occasions and hired an attorney. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 346 (1982), 288 (1981). On the other hand, this office has determined if an individual publicly threatens to bring suit against a governmental body, but does not actually take objective steps toward filing suit, litigation is not reasonably anticipated. *See* Open Records Decision No. 331 (1982). Further, the fact that a potential opposing party has hired an attorney who makes a request for information does not establish litigation is reasonably anticipated. *See* Open Records Decision No. 361 (1983).

You claim the requestors referenced the collision in their present requests for information in such a way as to indicate a lawsuit is or will soon be pending. You further claim the district can and should reasonably anticipate litigation due to that reference. However, you do not inform us the requestors had taken any objective steps toward filing a suit against the district on the date the district received the present requests for information. *See* Gov’t Code § 552.301(e)(1)(A). Having considered your representations, we find the mere possibility of a suit does not establish that litigation was pending or reasonably anticipated when the district received the requests for information. *See id.* § 552.103(c); ORD 452 at 4; *see also* ORD 331 at 1-2 (mere chance of litigation not sufficient to trigger statutory predecessor to Gov’t Code § 552.103). Accordingly, we find you have failed to demonstrate the district was a party to pending or anticipated litigation on the date of the request. Therefore, the district may not withhold any of the remaining information under section 552.103 of the Government Code.

Section 552.102(a) of the Government Code excepts from disclosure “information in a personnel file, the disclosure of which would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.” Gov’t Code § 552.102(a). We understand you to assert the privacy analysis under section 552.102(a) is the same as the common-law privacy test encompassed by section 552.101 of the Government Code. *See Indus. Found. v. Tex. Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 685 (Tex. 1976). In *Hubert v. Harte-Hanks Texas Newspapers, Inc.*, 652 S.W.2d 546, 549-51 (Tex. App.—Austin 1983, writ ref’d n.r.e.), the court of appeals ruled the privacy test under section 552.102(a) is the same as the *Industrial Foundation* privacy test. However, the Texas Supreme Court has expressly disagreed with *Hubert’s* interpretation of section 552.102(a), and held the privacy standard under section 552.102(a) differs from the *Industrial Foundation* test under section 552.101. *See Tex. Comptroller of Pub. Accounts v. Attorney Gen. of Tex.*, 354 S.W.3d 336 (Tex. 2010). The supreme court also considered the applicability of section 552.102(a) and held it excepts from disclosure the dates of birth of state employees in the payroll database of the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts. *See id.* at 348. We note section 552.102(a) is applicable to dates of birth maintained by a governmental body in an employment context. Upon

review, we find none of the information you seek to withhold is subject to section 552.102(a). Therefore, the district may not withhold any of the information at issue under section 552.102(a) of the Government Code.

Section 552.111 of the Government Code 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. This exception encompasses the attorney work product privilege found in rule 192.5 of the Texas Rules of Civil Procedure. *City of Garland v. Dallas Morning News*, 22 S.W.3d 351, 360 (Tex. 2000); ORD 677 at 4-8. Rule 192.5 defines work product as

- (1) material prepared or mental impressions developed in anticipation of litigation or for trial by or for a party or a party’s representatives, including the party’s attorneys, consultants, sureties, indemnitors, insurers, employees, or agents; or
- (2) a communication made in anticipation of litigation or for trial between a party and the party’s representatives or among a party’s representatives, including the party’s attorneys, consultants, sureties, indemnitors, insurers, employees or agents.

TEX. R. CIV. P. 192.5. A governmental body seeking to withhold information under this exception bears the burden of demonstrating that the information was created or developed for trial or in anticipation of litigation by or for a party or a party’s representative. *Id.*; ORD 677 at 6-8. In order for this office to conclude that the information was made or developed in anticipation of litigation, we must be satisfied that:

- a) a reasonable person would have concluded from the totality of the circumstances surrounding the investigation that there was a substantial chance that litigation would ensue; and b) the party resisting discovery believed in good faith that there was a substantial chance that litigation would ensue and [created or obtained the information] for the purpose of preparing for such litigation.

Nat’l Tank Co. v. Brotherton, 851 S.W.2d 193, 207 (Tex. 1993). A “substantial chance” of litigation does not mean a statistical probability, but rather “that litigation is more than merely an abstract possibility or unwarranted fear.” *Id.* at 204; ORD 677 at 7.

Upon review, we find you have failed to establish any of the information you seek to withhold under section 552.111 consists of material prepared, mental impressions developed, or a communication made in anticipation of litigation or for trial by or for the district. Therefore, the district may not withhold any of the information at issue as attorney work

product under section 552.111 of the Government Code. As you raise no other exceptions to disclosure, the district must release the submitted information in its entirety.

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,



Lee Seidlits
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

CLS/dls

Ref: ID# 564247

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)