

**SOVEREIGN IMMUNITY OR “THE GAME OF THRONES”  
(IT’S A GREAT DAY FOR A RED WEDDING)**

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# SOVEREIGN IMMUNITY OR “THE GAME OF THRONES” (IT’S A GREAT DAY FOR A RED WEDDING)<sup>1</sup>

## I. INTRODUCTION

This article analyzes sovereign immunity and the extent the Texas Legislature waived sovereign immunity through enactment of the Texas Tort Claims Act (the “TCA” or “Act”). The article begins by outlining the application and effect of common-law sovereign immunity. Next, the article analyzes various provisions of the Act, including the courts’ interpretation of these provisions, focusing on: (1) sovereign immunity and tort liability of governmental entities at common law; (2) how sovereign immunity can be waived; (3) the waiver of sovereign immunity for tort liability under the Act; (4) the exclusions and defenses to liability under the Act; (5) submission of a premises-liability case to the jury; and (6) various miscellaneous issues that arise in tort suits against governmental entities.

## II. SOVEREIGN IMMUNITY

Generally, governmental entities that enjoy sovereign immunity are not liable for the torts of their employees, absent a constitutional or statutory waiver of that immunity.<sup>2</sup> Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Able, 35 S.W.3d 608, 611 (Tex. 2000); Lowe v. Tex. Tech Univ., 540 S.W.2d 297, 298 (Tex. 1976). The Act, for example, imposes liability based upon the condition or use of real and personal property and common law standards of liability. At the same time, where the Act or other statute or constitutional provision does not specifically waive governmental immunity from suit and liability, common law sovereign immunity remains the rule of law. Therefore, understanding the extent and basis for liability under the Act requires an understanding of sovereign immunity and common law premises liability.

### A. A Brief History of Sovereign Immunity.

#### 1. The Origins of Sovereign Immunity in American and Texas Jurisprudence.

Although the origins of sovereign immunity extend back to the English monarchy, it has been recognized in this country since the drafting of our Constitution. Alexander Hamilton spoke of sovereign immunity in the Federalist papers saying:

It is inherent in the nature of sovereignty not to be amenable to suit of an individual without

its consent. This is the general scheme and the general practice of mankind; and the exception, of one of the attributes of sovereignty, is now enjoyed by the government of every State in the Union.

THE FEDERALIST No. 81, at 487 [Alexander Hamilton][Clinton Rossitor Ed., 1961]. Hamilton made this statement in part to assuage fears that the new constitution would abrogate states’ sovereign immunity. Wichita Falls State Hosp. v. Taylor, 106 S.W.3d 692 (Tex. 2003). Thus, while United States Constitution established a system of “dual sovereignty” whereby “the States surrendered many of their powers to the new Federal Government, they retained a ‘residuary and inviolable sovereignty.’” Printz v. United States, 521 U.S. 898, 918–19 (1997) (Scalia, J.) (quoting THE FEDERALIST NO. 39 (James Madison)). Wasson Interests, Ltd. v. City of Jacksonville 489 S.W.3d 427, 429, n. 1 (Tex. 2016). See also Wichita Falls State Hosp. v. Taylor, 106 S.W.3d 692, 694–95 (Tex. 2003). Such sovereignty is inherent in its statehood, Alden v. Maine, 527 U.S. 706, 713 (1999), and generally protects the state from suits for money damages, Tex. Nat. Res. Conservation Comm’n v. IT-Davy, 74 S.W.3d 849, 853 (Tex. 2002). Accordingly, state sovereign immunity was preserved by the Constitution. Alden v. Maine, 527 U.S. 706, 713, 119 S.Ct. 2240, 144 L.Ed. 2d 636 (1999); Meyers v. Texas, 410 F.3d 236, 240 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2005). While, sovereign immunity is sometimes linked to the “futile fiction that ‘the king can do no wrong’ and sovereign immunity ‘is an established principle of jurisprudence in all civilized nations [and in all states of the Union]’.” Taylor, 106 S.W.3d at 694-95 (quoting Beers v. Arkansas, 61 U.S. 527, 529, 20 How. 527, 15 L.Ed. 991 (1857)).

In Texas jurisprudence, sovereign immunity was first recognized by the Texas Supreme Court, not by operation of the Constitution or statute. “In 1847, this court held that ‘no State can be sued in her own court without her consent and then only in the manner indicated by that consent....’ The Court did not cite the origin of that declaration, but it appears to be rooted in an early understanding of sovereignty.” *Id.* (quoting Hosner v. De Young, 1 Tex. 764, 769 (1847)). Tex. Nat. Res. Conservation Comm’n v. IT-Davy, 74 S.W.3d 849, 863 (Tex. 2002) (Enoch, J., dissenting). “Two years after Texas joined the Union, this Court recognized the doctrine of sovereign immunity: “no state can be sued in her own courts without her consent, and then only in the manner indicated by that consent.” Hosner v. De Young, 1 Tex. 764, 769 (1847).” Wasson

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Drew Edge, Blaire Knox and Natalie Mahlberg for their help preparing this paper. And thanks to Kay Cartwright for taking our writing and making it readable and presentable.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is a shorten form of a longer paper on sovereign immunity and therefore please understand some short cites are not proceeded by a full citation in this paper.

Interests, Ltd. v. City of Jacksonville, 489 S.W.3d 427, 431 (Tex. 2016). Thus, sovereign immunity in Texas jurisprudence came through recognition of the common law principle recognizing the inherent immunity of any governmental unit, not from statute or any particular provision of the constitution. See Wichita Falls State Hosp., 106 S.W.3d at 692.

## 2. The Purpose of Sovereign Immunity.

Generally, the courts recognize sovereign immunity as serving two purposes. The first purpose is to preclude second guessing of certain governmental actions and decisions. See Tex. Dep’t of Protective & Regulatory Servs. v. Mega Child Care, Inc., 145 S.W.3d 170, 198 (Tex. 2004). See also City of El Paso v. Heinrich, 284 S.W.3d 366, 371-73 & n.6 (Tex. 2009) (litigation cannot be utilized “*to control state action by imposing liability on the State*” (italics in the original)). Thus, policy level decisions, decisions regarding budgeting and allocation of resources, decisions regarding the provision of certain services (fire, police, and emergency services) and decisions regarding the design of public works cannot be the bases of suit. Sw. Bell Tel., L. P. v. Harris County Toll Road Auth., 282 S.W.3d 59, 68 (Tex. 2009). “As we have often noted, the Legislature is best positioned to waive or abrogate sovereign immunity because it allows the Legislature to protect its policymaking function.” *Id.* (internal quotation and citation omitted); Wasson Interests, Ltd. v. City of Jacksonville, 489 S.W.3d 427 (Tex. 2016). See Tex. Home Mgmt. v. Peavy, 89 S.W.3d 30, 43 (Tex. 2002); TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 101.021. Second, the courts recognize that sovereign immunity serves to protect the public treasury. Ben Bolt-Palito Blanco Consol. Ind. Sch. Dist. v. Tex. Political Subdivisions Prop. Cas. Self Ins. Fund, 212 S.W.3d 320 (Tex. 2006). Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Sefzik, 355 S.W.3d 618 (Tex. 2011); Rolling Plains Groundwater Cons. Dist. v. City of Aspermont, 2011 WL 5041964 (Tex. Oct. 21, 2011) \*3; Wichita Falls State Hosp., 106 S.W.3d at 692. The purpose of sovereign immunity and governmental immunity “is pragmatic: to shield the public from the cost and consequences of imprudent actions of their government.” *Id.* (internal quotation omitted); Wasson, 489 S.W.3d 427, 431–32 (Tex. 2016) (“the stated reasons for immunity have changed over time. The theoretical justification has evolved from the English legal fiction that ‘[t]he King can do no wrong,’<sup>1</sup> WILLIAM BLACKSTONE, COMMENTARIES \*246, to ‘accord[ing] States the dignity that is consistent with their status as sovereign entities,’ Fed. Mar. Comm’n v. S.C. State Ports Auth., 535 U.S. 743, 760, 122 S.Ct. 1864, 152 L.Ed.2d 962 (2002), to ‘protect[ing] the public treasury,’ Taylor, 106 S.W.3d at 695. Regardless of which justification is most compelling, however, it is firmly established that ‘an important purpose [of immunity] is pragmatic: to shield

the public from the costs and consequences of improvident actions of their governments”); City of Houston v. Williams, 353 S.W.3d 128, 131 (Tex. 2011). In the Rusk State Hospital decision, the Supreme Court again affirmed, that one of the purposes of sovereign immunity and early rulings on the issue of immunity to file suit, is to avoid the wasting of tax dollars on defending suits, including on discovery, where claims are barred by immunity. Houston Belt & Terminal RR Co. v. City of Houston, 487 S.W.3d 154, 157 (Tex. 2016) (“An important justification for this immunity is pragmatic: it shields “the public from the costs and consequences of improvident actions of their governments. Yet the pragmatic rationale supporting this immunity also helps to delineate its limits—”extending immunity to officials using state resources in violation of the law would not be an efficient way of ensuring those resources are spent as intended”); Rusk State Hospital v. Black, 392 S.W.3d 88, 97, 106 (Tex. 2012); Heinrich, 284 S.W.3d 375 (one of the goals/purposes of sovereign immunity is to protect the public fisc). See also Hearts Bluff Game Ranch, Inc., v. State, 381 S.W.3d 468, 489 (Tex. 2012) (Texas Supreme Court refused to find a waiver of immunity in part because governmental entity would be left weighing whether “to act in the best interests of the people versus defending lawsuits”).

This protection also extends to suits attempting to try the State’s title to property. State v. Lain, 162 Tex. 549, 349 S.W.2d 579 (1961). But see Tex. Parks & Wildlife v. The Sawyer Trust, 354 S.W.3d 384 (Tex. 2011); Lain, 329, S.W.2d at 581; Parker v. Hunegnaw, 364 S.W.3d 398 (Tex.App.—Houston [14<sup>th</sup> Dist.] 2012); State v. BP Am. Prod. Co., 290 S.W.3d 345, 357–58 (Tex.App.—Austin 2009) (sovereign immunity does not bar suit where it has been determined that plaintiff and not the State has superior title and right of possession, therefore sovereign immunity did not preclude BP’s trespass to try title suit against the State of Texas).

Allowing plaintiffs to bring suit and recover judgments would force governmental entities to take money from other activities (providing police protection, building public improvements, and providing social services) and expend those funds to defend law suits and pay judgments. Wichita Falls State Hosp., 106 S.W.3d at 698.; Catalina Dev., Inc. v. County of El Paso, 121 S.W.3d 704 (Tex. 2003). See Rusk State Hospital v. Black, 392 S.W.3d at 97, 106.

Subjecting the government to liability may hamper governmental functions by shifting tax resources away from their intended purposes toward defending lawsuits and paying judgments. ... Accordingly, the Legislature is better suited than the courts to weigh the conflicting public policies

associated with waiving immunity and exposing the government to increased liability, the burden of which the general public must ultimately bear.

IT-Davy, 74 S.W.3d at 854. See Wasson Interests, 489 S.W.3d 427 (Tex. 2016); Brown & Gay Engineering, Inc., v. Olivares, 461 S.W.3d 117 (Tex. 2015) (“Sovereign immunity ... protects the public as a whole by preventing potential disruptions of key government services that could occur when government funds are unexpectedly and substantially diverted by litigation. ... ‘[S]overeign immunity generally shields our state government’s improvident acts—however improvident, harsh, unjust, or infuriatingly boneheaded these acts may seem’ ” (quoting Bacon v. Tex. Historical Comm’n, 411 S.W.3d 161, 172 (Tex.App.—Austin 2013, no pet.)); Tooke, 197 S.W.3d at 331–32 (Bacon v. Tex. Historical Comm’n, 411 S.W.3d 161, 172 (Tex.App.—Austin 2013, no pet.)) ; Tooke, 197 S.W.3d at 331–32 (It remains a fundamental principle of Texas law, intended “to shield the public from the costs and consequences of improvident actions of their governments.”); Harris County Hosp. Dist. v. Tomball Reg’l Hosp., 283 S.W.3d 838, 847 (Tex. 2009) ([t]he judicial task is not to refine legislative choices about how to most effectively provide for indigent care and collect and distribute taxes to pay for it. The judiciary’s task is to interpret legislation as it is written”); Sw. Bell Tel. at 68 (“[b]ut as we have often noted, the Legislature is best positioned to waive or abrogate sovereign immunity ‘because this allows the Legislature to protect its policymaking function.’”); McIntyre v. Ramirez, 109 S.W.3d 741, 748 (Tex. 2003) (“[o]ur role ... is not to second-guess the policy choices that inform our statutes or to weigh the effectiveness of their results; rather, our task is to interpret those statutes in a manner that effectuates the Legislature’s intent”).

The courts have recognized that one element of sovereign immunity, immunity from suit, is critical to allowing governmental entities flexibility in dealing with their contractual obligations. The Texas Supreme Court has repeatedly stated that immunity from suit serves the purpose of allowing governmental entities to avoid contractual obligations. Sovereign immunity and precluding suits for breach of contract prevent governmental entities from being bound by policy decisions of their predecessors. *Id.*; City of Houston v. Williams, 353 S.W.3d 128, 131 (Tex. 2011) (The purpose of sovereign immunity and governmental immunity “is pragmatic: to shield the public from the cost and consequences of imprudent actions of their government.”); IT-Davy, 74 S.W.3d at 854. In the IT-Davy decision, the Supreme Court went so far as to say that forcing a contractor to obtain legislative permission to sue insures current officials are not bound by long term contracts made by their predecessors. *Id.*

Thus, in the contractual realm, the Supreme Court has expressly recognized that immunity allows governmental entities to breach their contracts and rely upon immunity to preclude suit when it is determined that contract no longer serves the best interest of the entity.

While Justice Hecht has stated that sovereign immunity must not be used as a means of stealing goods or services from contractors and a majority of that court continues to hold out the possibility that a governmental entity may waive immunity by contract, to date the Texas Supreme Court has not found a single instance in which a governmental entity has waived its immunity from suit by its conduct. See IT-Davy, 74 S.W.3d 860-61 (Hecht, J., concurring), 863-64 (Enoch, J., dissenting). Consequently, persons doing business with the State of Texas, counties, cities and other governmental entities in Texas may be doing so at their own risk. These contractors cannot depend upon being able to bring suit for damages in case the governmental entity breaches the contract. Contractors should adjust their price, closely monitor the governmental entity’s performance of its obligations, not perform additional services or some combination of these in order to deal with the risk created by sovereign immunity. However, a recent decision by the First Court of Appeals reaches the conclusion that immunity from suit for contract can be waived by the State’s conduct. Tex. S. Univ. v. State Street Bank & Trust Co., 212 S.W.3d 893 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2007, pet. denied). But see Leach v. Tex. Tech Univ., 335 S.W.3d 386, 400 (Tex.App.—Amarillo 2011, writ pending) (refusing to find a waiver by conduct based on the Texas Supreme Court’s holdings and refusing to follow the holding in State Street.)

Over the last two years, the Texas Supreme Court and the courts of appeal have combined these two separate reasons for sovereign immunity, precluding second guessing of decisions by the administrative and legislative branches and protecting the public treasury, into one over reaching basis for immunity. The courts now focus on sovereign immunity as serving the purpose of preventing litigation from being used to control the actions of the State and other governmental entities. Heinrich, 284 S.W.3d at 372-73; Combs v. City of Webster, 311 S.W.3d 85, 90-91 (Tex.App.—Austin, 2009). Interestingly the Texas Supreme Court considered the issue of “controlling” governmental entities through litigation, when it decided Cobb v. Harrington back in 1945. Cobb, 144 Tex. at 365-66.

### 3. What Governmental Entities Enjoy Sovereign Immunity?

Sovereign immunity extends far beyond the state itself. The state’s agencies and political subdivisions also enjoy sovereign immunity. General Servs. Comm’n v. Little-Tex Insulation Co., 39 S.W.3d 591,

594 (Tex.2001); Lesley v. Veterans Land Board, 352 S.W.3d 479 (Tex. 2011); Lowe v. Tex. Tech Univ., 540 S.W.2d 297 (Tex. 1976); Tex. A&M Univ. v. Bishop, 996 S.W.2d 209, 212 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1999, rev’d on other grounds, 35 S.W.3d 605 (Tex. 2000)); Clark v. Univ. of Tex. Health Science Ctr., 919 S.W.2d 185, 187-88 (Tex.App.—Eastland 1996, n.w.h.). Consequently, state agencies and state universities, have sovereign immunity. Lowe, 540 at 298 (Tex. 1976); Heigel v. Wichita County, 84 Tex. 392, 19 S.W. 562, 563 (1892). Additionally, “[p]olitical subdivisions of the state—such as counties, municipalities and school districts—share the state’s inherent immunity.” Wasson Interests, Ltd. v. City of Jacksonville, 489 S.W.3d 427, 429–30 (Tex. 2016). Sovereign immunity also protects state junior colleges, hospital districts, and other special-purpose governmental districts. TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 101.001(2)(A)-(B); San Antonio Independent School Dist. v. McKinney, 936 S.W.2d 279 (Tex. 1996). See Loyd v. ECO Res., Inc., 956 S.W.2d 110, 122-123 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1997, no pet); Bennett v. Brown County Water Imp. Dist. No. 1, 272 S.W.2d 498 (Tex. 1954); Willacy County Water Control and Improvement Dist. No. 1 v. Abendroth, 177 S.W.2d 936 (Tex. 1944); Biclamowicz v. Cedar Hill Indep. School Dist., 136 S.W.3d 718 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2004, no pet. h.). “When performing governmental functions, political subdivisions derive governmental immunity from the State’s sovereign immunity.” City of Houston v. Williams, 353 S.W.3d 128, 131 (Tex. 2011).

Sovereign immunity as it applies to local governmental entities is often referred to as “governmental immunity.” Harris County Hosp. Dist. v. Tomball Reg’l Hosp., 283 S.W.3d at 842 (“[g]overnmental immunity, like the doctrine of sovereign immunity to which it is appurtenant, involves two issues: whether the State has consented to suit and whether the State has accepted liability”).

Courts look to the “nature, purpose and powers of an entity in determining if the entity is a governmental entity that will enjoy sovereign or governmental immunity.” In Ben Bolt-Palito Blanco Consol. ISD v. Tex. Political Subdivisions Prop. Cas. Self Ins. Fund, 212 S.W.3d 320 (Tex. 2006), the Texas Supreme Court had to determine whether a governmental group risk pool made up of cities, counties, school districts, special purpose districts and other political subdivisions was a political subdivision of the state that enjoyed sovereign immunity. *Id.* In determining whether the pool was a governmental entity, the Supreme Court considered the fact that the Texas Government Code’s definition of “local government” includes combinations of political subdivisions. *Id.* The Court went on to note that the pool had “powers of government and [had] ... the authority to exercise such [governmental] rights, privileges, and functions”....” *Id.* at 325. Based on these factors, the

Court held that where, as with the pool, an entity’s “governing statutory authority demonstrates legislative intent to grant an entity the nature, purpose and powers of an arm of the state government, that entity is a government unit unto itself.” *Id.* at 325-26. See also LTTS Charter School, Inc. v. C2 Construction, Inc., 342 S.W.3d 73 (Tex. 2012); LTTS Charter School, Inc. v. C2 Construction, Inc., 358 S.W.3d 725, 734 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2012, pet. pending); Klein v. Hernandez, 315 S.W.3d 1 (Tex. 2010) (by provision of statute Baylor Medical School is a state agency and enjoys sovereign immunity).

Governmental group risk or self-insurance pools are political subdivisions of the state that enjoy sovereign immunity. *Id.* Governmental group risk or self insurance pools are political subdivisions enjoying immunity in their own right and not just because they are composed of entities which have sovereign immunity. *Id.* at 326. The Court found that governmental self insurance or group risk pools are local governmental entities, similar to cities, and school districts. *Id.*

In LTTS Charter School, Inc. v. C2 Construction, Inc., 342 S.W.3d 73 (Tex. 2012), the Texas Supreme Court did not address whether an open-enrollment charter school is entitled to immunity from suit and immunity from liability but rather addressed whether an open-enrollment charter school is entitled to bring an interlocutory appeal under Chapter 51 of the Civil Practice and Remedies Code. Chapter 51 of the Civil Practice and Remedies Code, authorized governmental entities to bring interlocutory appeals from denial of motions raising immunity but does not define what constitutes a governmental entity. *Id.* The court turned to the TCA’s definition of a “governmental unit” to decide what organizations as empowered to bring interlocutory appeals. The TCA defines governmental entities to include any “institution, agency, or organ of government the status and authority of which are derived from the Texas Constitution or from laws passed by the Legislature under the Constitution.” *Id.* (quoting TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 101.001(3)(D)). Rather than determining if open-enrollment charter schools have governmental status or authority derived from the Texas Constitution or laws passed by the Legislature under the Constitution, the Supreme Court followed the same analysis it relied upon in the UIL case to open-enrollment charter schools. *Id.*

Specifically, the Texas Supreme Court focused on the role, powers and limitations placed on open-enrollment charter schools in deciding whether they are governmental entities determining whether it was a governmental entity under the Tort Claims Act. *Id.* The Court noted that open enrollment charter schools are “indisputably” part of the Texas public education system, these schools have an explicit grant of authority under Title II of the Education Code, are schools open

to general enrollment which receive funding from the State of Texas and cannot charge tuition. *Id.* These schools are subject to the Competitive Bidding Statute, the Public Information Act, and the Open Meetings Act. *Id.* These factors/characteristics led the Supreme Court to conclude that, “We are confident that the Legislature considers [open enrollment charter schools] to be an ‘institution, agency, or organ of government’ under the Tort Claims Act and thus entitled to take an interlocutory appeal here.” *Id.*

Eight years after *LTTS*, the Texas Supreme Court expressly held that open-enrollment charter schools and their charter-holders have governmental immunity from suit and liability to the same extent that public schools do. *El Paso Educ. Initiative, Inc. v. Amex Props., LLC*, No. 18-1167, 63 Tex. Sup. Ct. J. 1166, 2020 Tex. LEXIS 436 (May 22, 2020). The Court reasoned that “open-enrollment charter schools act as an arm of the State government,” and therefore “[e]xtending governmental immunity to open-enrollment charter schools also satisfies governmental immunity’s purposes.” *Id.* at \*10–11. The Court went on to analyze the specific claims under Local Government Code Chapter 271’s waiver for breach-of-contract claims, using the same standard as prior Chapter 271 cases. *Id.* at \*11–14.

The Austin Court of Appeals found that University Interscholastic League (“UIL”) was a governmental entity that enjoys sovereign immunity through its connection with the University of Texas. The Austin Court found that UIL enjoys sovereign immunity because it is part of the University of Texas. *UIL v. Sw. Officials Ass’n, Inc.*, 319 S.W.3d at 957-63. This holding was based on the fact that the UIL was referenced by statute as being part of the University of Texas, it had to report and account for all its activities and funds to state governmental entities, by statute it has rule making authority over high school sports and participation in those sports, the Texas Attorney General’s office found that it was subject to the Public Information Act, UIL was subject to Sun Set Laws, and, like other state entities, by statute, mandatory venue for suits against UIL is in Travis County. *UIL*, 319 S.W.3d at 957-63.

In 2015, the Texas Supreme Court held that a private university peace officer is an “officer or employee of the state” that may file an interlocutory appeal under Section 51.014(a)(5). *William Marsh Rice Univ. v. Refaey*, 459 S.W.3d 590 (Tex. 2015) (per curiam). In *Refaey*, the Court held that Rice University’s police officers were “officers ... of the state” because the Texas Education Code affords a similar immunity to private university police officers that it affords to other peace officers. *Id.* at 593-95. While on campus, such officers have duties and responsibilities similar to other peace officers elsewhere in Texas, and the Legislature provided that they are

“vested with all the powers, privileges, and immunities of peace officers.” *Id.* 594-95 (citing TEX. EDUC. CODE § 51.212(b)).

In *University of the Incarnate Word v. Redus*, 518 S.W.3d 905 (Tex. 2017) (“*Redus I*”), the Texas Supreme Court held that a private university police department is a “governmental unit” for purposes of Section 51.014(a)(8). The Court recognized that this situation was not clearly governed by specific statutory provisions that guided the result in previous cases, because “private institutions are not commonly understood to be a part ‘of government’” and they do not receive public funds. *Id.* at 907. Nevertheless, the Court focused narrowly on the role that the university’s police force plays in the overall scheme of peace officers across Texas, and noted that the university’s police force operated under laws enacted by the Legislature that guide and restrain their operations. *Id.* at 908-11.

*Redus I*’s holding was sharply limited when the case returned to the Texas Supreme Court. *Univ. of the Incarnate Word v. Redus*, No. 18-0351, 63 Tex. Sup. Ct. J. 1136, 2020 Tex. LEXIS 432 (May 22, 2020) (“*Redus II*”). The Court held that because it was a private entity, “the University does not act as an arm of the State in its overall operations. And though the University’s law enforcement activities benefit the public, its arguments for extending sovereign immunity do not comport with the doctrine’s historic justification: preserving the separation of government power and protecting the public treasury from lawsuits and judgments.” *Id.* at \*2. The Court further noted that unlike public charter schools, here the “State did not charter or create the University,” and has neither a role in funding nor hiring or firing the private officers. *Id.* at \*12–13. That lack of control and accountability was key in the Court’s decision that the University was not acting as an arm of the State, and therefore there was no sovereign immunity for the University’s police department. *Id.*

A 2018 case in the Dallas Court of Appeals again had to determine the question of what constituted a governmental entity that enjoys immunity. *Electric Reliability Council of Texas, Inc. v. Panda Power Generation Infrastructure Fund, LLC*, 552 S.W.3d 297 (Tex. App.—Dallas 2018, pet. pending and mand. filed). After the trial court denied its plea to the jurisdiction based on governmental immunity, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas (“ERCOT”) filed an interlocutory appeal. ERCOT acknowledged that in a 2013 decision the Austin Court of Appeals had held that ERCOT was not a “governmental unit” entitled to interlocutory appeal under Section 51.014(a)(8). But ERCOT argued that the Texas Supreme Court’s 2017 decision in *University of the Incarnate Word v. Redus* regarding private university police departments imposed a “novel functional approach” that compelled the conclusion that ERCOT is a “governmental unit,” because of ERCOT’s wide discretion and regulatory

power. *Id.* at 306-09 (discussing *HWY 3 MHP, LLC v. Elec. Reliability Council of Texas*, 462 S.W.3d 204, 212 (Tex. App.—Austin 2015, no pet.)). The Austin Court of Appeals rejected ERCOT’s argument, reasoning that the 2017 decision had not changed the applicable legal principles, but had merely applied them to a different set of circumstances. But the Austin Court nevertheless granted *mandamus* and held that ERCOT was entitled to the protections of sovereign immunity for its regulatory decisions. *Id.* at 318. Both sides have appealed to the Texas Supreme Court by filing an interlocutory appeal (ERCOT) and *mandamus* (Panda Power).

The lesson of the Texas Supreme Court’s opinions is that, if a defendant is an entity that performs governmental related functions, it will likely be held to enjoy governmental immunity **for those functions**. *Klein*, 315 S.W.3d 1. In *Klein*, the Texas Supreme Court noted that the Texas Health & Safety Code granted Baylor Medical School, a private medical school, full sovereign immunity in connection with the provision of medical care at public hospitals, and to its residents who work at these public hospitals. *Id.* But see *Rosenberg Dev. Corp. v. Imperial Performing Arts, Inc.*, 571 S.W.3d 738 (Tex. 2019). Even where an entity carries out a government function, it does not enjoy immunity where its statute states it is not a political subdivision. *Id.* The Court held that Type B Economic Development Corporation did not enjoy sovereign/governmental immunity where its enabling statute states it is not a political subdivision. *Id.* See also *Orion Real Estate v. Sarro*, 559 S.W.3d 599 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 2018)(Public Facility Corporation, like economic development corporations are in essence, nonprofit corporations that undertake discrete projects for the benefit of their sponsors, considering the nature and purposes of governmental immunity and the nature of public facility corporations they are not distinct governmental entities entitled to governmental immunity).

- (a.) Whether a Municipality Enjoys Sovereign Immunity Depends on if its Actions Carry Out a Governmental or Proprietary Function.

Whether a city enjoys sovereign immunity depends upon the capacity in which it acts. *Wasson Interests, Ltd. v. City of Jacksonville*, 489 S.W.3d 427 (Tex. 2016). Cities act in either a governmental capacity or a proprietary capacity. *Id.* See *Dilley v. City of Houston*, 222 S.W.2d 992, 993 (Tex. 1949); *Barges v. City of San Antonio*, 21 S.W.3d 347, 356 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 2000, pet. denied). Governmental functions are those “[a]cts done as a branch of the state—such as when a city ‘exercise[s] powers conferred on [it] for purposes essentially public ... pertaining to the administration of general laws made to enforce the general policy of the state,’” such as duties imposed by law or assigned by the

state. *Wasson*, 489 S.W.3d 427, 433 (Tex. 2016). “Propriety functions are those functions performed by a [municipality], in its discretion, primarily for the benefit of those within the corporate limits of the municipality.” *Id.* When a city acts in a proprietary capacity, it is not acting as an arm of the government; it does not have sovereign immunity and is therefore liable as a private citizen for the torts of its employees and its breached of a contract. *Id.*; *Dilley*, 222 S.W.2d at 993. When a city acts in its governmental capacity it enjoys full sovereign immunity as an agent of the sovereign, the state. *Wasson*, 489 S.W.3d 427 (Tex. 2016); *Dilley*, 222 S.W.2d at 993.

Beginning in 2003, the Texas Supreme Court began to delineate between the kind of immunity applicable to the State and its entities, and the kind of immunity applicable to local governmental entities that derive their immunity from the state but are not state agencies. *Wichita Falls State Hosp. v. Taylor*, 106 S.W.3d 692, 694 n. 3 (Tex. 2003). As the sovereign, the state and its agencies enjoy “sovereign immunity.” *Id.* “In addition to protecting the State from liability . . . [sovereign immunity] also protects the various divisions of state government, including agencies, boards, hospitals, and universities.” *Id.* (citing *Lowe v. Tex. Tech Univ.*, 540 S.W.2d 297 (Tex. 1976)). On the other hand, “governmental immunity” is the proper title for the immunity from suit and liability enjoyed by political subdivisions of the state, such as counties, cities, and school districts. *Harris County Hosp. Dist v. Tomball Reg’l Hosp.*, 283 S.W.3d 838, 842 (Tex. 2009); *Wichita Falls State Hosp.*, 106 S.W.3d at 694 n. 3. *Id.* The protections of governmental and sovereign immunity are the same, except as we shall see, where a political subdivision of the state is sued by or sues, the State or its agencies. For convenience, the term “sovereign immunity” is used in this paper to refer to the immunity enjoyed both by the State of Texas and its agencies, as well as political subdivisions of the state.

4. What Branch of Government Can Waive Sovereign Immunity for a Class of Governmental Defendants or for a Particular Type of Claim?

While it may have been a decision of the Texas Supreme Court that first interjected sovereign immunity into Texas jurisprudence, the court has consistently held that any waiver of immunity rests within the sole discretion of the Texas Legislature.

Most sovereigns have long abandoned the fiction that governments and their officials can ‘do no wrong.’ To varying degrees, states and the federal government have voluntarily relinquished the privilege of absolute immunity by waiving immunity in certain contexts.

...



Courts in other jurisdictions have occasionally abrogated sovereign immunity by judicial decree. We have held, however, that the Legislature is better suited to balance the conflicting policy issues associated with waiving immunity.

Wichita Falls State Hosp., 106 S.W.3d at 695-96 (emphasis added).

The Texas Supreme Court decisions are in conflict over the question of whether the Legislature can empower agencies of the administrative branch and/or local governmental entities to waive immunity. Compare Univ. of Tex. at El Paso v. Herrera, 322 S.W.3d 192, 201 (Tex. 2010) (court does not reach the issue of whether the University of Texas at El Paso can waive its immunity through its personnel policies) and City of Dallas v. Albert, 354 S.W.3d 368 (Tex. 2011); Tex. Nat’l Res. Conserv. Comm’n v. IT-Davy, 74 S.W.3d 849, 857-58 (Tex. 2002). In IT-Davy, the contractor argued that the agency waived its immunity from suit by the terms of the contract. The Supreme Court rejected this argument holding, “Texas law is clear. Only the Legislature can waive sovereign immunity from suit in a breach-of-contract claim. Administrative agencies...are part of our government’s administrative branch [and] consequently cannot waive immunity from suit. It also follows that administrative agents—even those who have authority to contract on the agency’s behalf—cannot waive their agency’s immunity from suit.”

The Supreme Court had an opportunity to re-state the IT-Davy holding in 2010 but refused to address the issue of whether the Legislature refused to address the issue of whether the Legislature could empower agencies to waive their immunity from suit. See Herrera, 322 S.W.3d at 201. Herrera claimed that UTEP had waived immunity by means of its Personnel Handbook. Id. The Supreme Court did not reach the issue of whether UTEP had the power to waive its own immunity, instead deciding that the language in the handbook could not be read as a waiver of immunity. Id.; see Leach, 335 S.W.3d at 394-95 (finding that University’s operating procedures enacted pursuant to the Education Code did not waive immunity). Similarly, the Texas Supreme Court has never expressly resolved the issue of whether a City’s Charter can waive immunity, instead finding the language in the charter was insufficient to constitute a waiver. Tooke v. City of Mexia, 197 S.W.3d 325, 344 (Tex. 2006).

However, the Supreme Court’s decision in Albert seems to indicate that the Court now takes the position that a governmental entity cannot waive its own immunity, except by way of creating a right to offset when it brings a claim against an opposing party. Albert arose out of claims by Dallas firefighters and policemen

that they were not being paid in accordance with the terms of an ordinance passed by public referendum. Albert, 354 S.W.3d 368, 370. The City counterclaimed saying that some of the plaintiffs have indeed been overpaid. The officers asserted that the City had waived immunity by filing its counterclaim and/or by the passage of the ordinance. The Supreme Court agreed that once the City filed the counterclaim, the trial court had jurisdiction over any properly asserted germane claims that could offset the amount of the City’s claims against the plaintiffs. Id. at 375. However, the Court held that the filing of the counter claim was NOT a waiver of immunity by the City. Id. The Supreme Court went on to hold, that just as the Dallas City Council could not waive immunity by passing an ordinance and the voters of the city could not waive immunity by ordinance resulting from a referendum. Id. at 379-380. Albert and Sharyland Water Supply Corp v. City of Alton suggest that at present the Supreme Court is unwilling to find that a governmental entity can take actions to waive its own immunity. Id.; Sharyland Water Supply Corp v. City of Alton, 354 S.W.3d 407 (Tex. 2011) (rejecting the idea that courts can find a waiver of immunity from suit by conduct).

The Texas Supreme Court has repeatedly noted that, because of the consequences that come with waiving immunity, the Legislature is in the best position to make those policy decisions. Albert, 354 S.W.3d 368, 379; Tomball Regional Hosp., 283 S.W.3d at 847 ([t]he judicial task is not to refine legislative choices about how to most effectively provide for indigent care and collect and distribute taxes to pay for it. The judiciary’s task is to interpret legislation as it is written”); Sw. Bell Tel., L.P. v. Harris County Toll Road Auth., 282 S.W.3d 59, 68 (Tex. 2009) (“[b]ut as we have often noted, the Legislature is best positioned to waive or abrogate sovereign immunity ‘because this allows the Legislature to protect its policymaking function’”); McIntyre v. Ramirez, 109 S.W.3d 741, 748 (Tex. 2003) (“[o]ur role ... is not to second-guess the policy choices that inform our statutes or to weigh the effectiveness of their results; rather, our task is to interpret those statutes in a manner that effectuates the Legislature’s intent”). The court’s deference to the Legislature to decide whether to waive immunity derives from both the principals related to separation of powers as well as the Legislature being better suited to make the decisions regarding allocation of resources. Tomball Reg’l Hosp., 283 S.W.3d at 848. See Sw. Bell Tel., L.P., 282 S.W.3d at 68.

At the same, the Texas Supreme Court has not “absolutely foreclosed the possibility that the judiciary may abrogate immunity by modifying the common law.” Id. Justices Hecht and Enoch have written concurring opinions in which they have noted that unless the Legislature addresses certain problems with sovereign immunity and/or the Tort Claims Act, the

Texas Supreme Court may act to abrogate immunity for the purpose of forcing the Legislature to act. See IT-Davy, 74 S.W.3d 863 (Enoch, J. Dissenting) (stating the Supreme Court should abrogate sovereign immunity in all breach of contract cases). Tex. Dep’t of Criminal Justice v. Miller, 51 S.W.3d 583, 590-592 (Tex. 2001) (Hecht, J., concurring) (noting that the distinction between use of property for which immunity has been waived and non-use of property for which there is no waiver creates distinctions that cannot be justified, articulated, explained, or understood; thus, judicial abolition of immunity may be necessary to prompt Legislature to enact legislation for determining when immunity is waived for the non-use of property).

## B. Sovereign Immunity at Common Law and the Two Forms of Immunity.

Under common law, governmental entities enjoyed full sovereign immunity. State v. Snyder, 18 S.W. 106, 109 (Tex. 1886); Hosner v. De Young, 1 Tex. 764 (1847); Buchanan v. State, 89 S.W.2d 239, 240 (Tex. Civ. App.—Amarillo 1936, writ ref’d). Sovereign immunity protects the State, its agencies, political subdivisions and officials from suits for damages. Fed. Sign v. Tex. S. Univ., 951 S.W.2d 401, 405 (Tex. 1997).

Sovereign immunity embraces two principals: *immunity from suit* and immunity from liability. First, the State retains immunity from suit without legislative consent, even if the State’s liability is not disputed. Second, the State retains *immunity from liability* though the Legislature has granted consent to the suit.

*Id.* (citations omitted); Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Jones, 8 S.W.3d 636, 638 (Tex. 1999) (“[i]mmunity from liability and immunity from suit are two distinct principles”). The Texas Supreme Court went on to explain the differences between the two different aspects of immunity.

*Immunity from suit* bars a suit against the State unless the State expressly gives its consent to the suit. In other words, although the claim asserted may be one on which the State acknowledges liability, this rule precludes a remedy until the Legislature consents to suit.  
...

*Immunity from liability* protects the State from judgments even if the Legislature has expressly given consent to the suit. In other words, even if the Legislature authorizes suit against the State the question remains whether the claim is one for which the State acknowledges liability. The State neither

admits liability by granting permission to be sued.

Federal Sign v. Texas Southern Univ., 951 S.W.2d 401, 405 (Tex. 1997) (citations omitted); State v. Lueck, 290 S.W.3d 876 (Tex. 2009) (“[i]mmunity from suit is a jurisdictional question of whether the State has expressly consented to suit. ... On the other hand, immunity from liability determines whether the State has accepted liability even after it has consented to suit”); Harris County. Hosp. Dist. v. Tomball Reg’l Hosp., 283 S.W.3d 838, 842 (Tex. 2009) (“[g]overnmental immunity, like the doctrine of sovereign immunity to which it is appurtenant, involves two issues: whether the State has consented to suit and whether the State has accepted liability”). See Rusk State Hospital v. Black, 392 S.W.3d at 95, 101, 103-06 (immunity from suit implicates and impacts a trial court’s jurisdiction, although the members of the Texas Supreme Court disagree on whether its impacts subject-matter jurisdiction or personal jurisdiction); Dillard v. Austin Indep. Sch. Dist., 806 S.W.2d 589, 592 (Tex.App.—Austin 1991, writ denied); Holder v. Mellon Mortgage Co., 954 S.W.2d 786, 804 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1997, *rev’d on other grounds*, 5 S.W.3d 654 (Tex. 1999); Missouri Pac. R.R. Co. v. Brownsville Navigation Dist., 453 S.W.2d 812, 813 (Tex. 1970); Harsfield, Governmental Immunity From Suit and Liability in Texas, 24 TEX. L. REV. 337 (1949); Jones, 8 S.W.3d at 638. See also City of Houston v. Rhule, 417 S.W.3d 440, 442 (Tex. 2013) (subject matter jurisdiction is essential to a court’s power to decide a case, can be raised for the first time on appeal, and all courts have the affirmative obligation to determine if they have subject matter jurisdiction).

Thus, sovereign immunity bars both suit and liability absent express consent to suit and liability being given. Jones, 8 S.W.3d at 638; Federal Sign, 951 S.W.2d at 408; Holder, 954 S.W.2d at 808. Accordingly, any plaintiff bringing suit for money damages against the State had the burden of proving the state had waived immunity from both suit and liability. See City of Houston v. Arney, 680 S.W.2d 867 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1984, no writ).

“A statute waives immunity from suit, immunity from liability, or both.” Lueck, 290 S.W.3d at 880. Statutes such as the TCA and the Whistleblower Act waive immunity from suit and liability, thus making immunity from suit and liability “co-extensive.” Lueck, 290 S.W.3d at 882. Thus, the plaintiff’s ability to establish the trial court’s jurisdiction is dependent upon her ability to prove liability. *Id.* See Hearts Bluff Game Ranch, Inc., v. State, 381 S.W.3d at 482-83. The Texas Supreme Court held that the trial court lacked jurisdiction over the plaintiff’s claims because the plaintiff could not establish that the government’s

actions proximately caused the taking of plaintiff’s property. *Id.*

### 1. Sovereign Immunity as it Applies to Torts.

With regard to tort claims, the State and its political subdivisions enjoy complete sovereign immunity (both immunity from suit and liability). Lowe, 540 S.W.2d at 298. “A Texas state agency [and other political subdivisions] may not be sued or held liable for the torts of its agents in the absence of a constitutional or statutory provision that waives [their] governmental immunity for alleged wrongful acts.” Tex. Parks & Wildlife Dep’t v. Davis, 988 S.W.2d 370, 372 (Tex.App.—Austin 1999, pet. pending). See In re United Servs. Auto. Ass’n, 307 S.W.3d 299, 307 (Tex. 2010). Thus, a plaintiff must establish both a waiver of immunity from suit **and** liability in order to successfully pursue to judgment a tort claim against the State or any of its political subdivisions.

### 2. Sovereign Immunity as it Applies to Contract Claims.

Contract and quasi-contract claims against governmental entities warrant special consideration. Recent decisions of the Texas Supreme Court and several Texas appellate courts have clearly stated that governmental entities enjoy a limited degree of sovereign immunity – immunity from suit only.

It has long been recognized that sovereign immunity protects the State from lawsuits for damages, absent legislative consent to sue the State. The term “sovereign immunity” actually includes two principles: immunity from suit and immunity from liability. Immunity from suit bars legal action against the State, even if the State acknowledges liability for the asserted claim, unless the legislature has given consent to sue. Immunity from liability protects the State from judgments, even if the legislature has expressly given consent to sue. When the State [or other governmental entity] enters into a contract with a private entity, it gives up its immunity from liability, but not its immunity from suit.

Aer-Aerotron, Inc. v. Tex. Dep’t of Transp., 997 S.W.2d 687, 690 (Tex.App.—Austin 1999, pet. granted) (emphasis added).

See further discussion of sovereign immunity in contract cases in section III, D, 1, below.

### 3. Heinrich Sovereign Immunity as it Applies to Claims for Injunctive and Equitable Relief.

Sovereign immunity offers the State and its subdivisions protection from the use of litigation to

control decision making or to access the public treasury. The court has long recognized an exception to immunity for suits brought against state *officials*, on the ground that those officials have acted outside of their statutory authority. Heinrich, 284 S.W.3d at 371-73; E.g., Cobb v. Harrington, 190 S.W.2d 709, 712 (Tex. 1945). State officials are likewise subject to the equitable remedy of mandamus. In re Smith, 333 S.W.3d 582, 585 (Tex. 2011)(sovereign immunity will not bar suit for mandamus, i.e., seeking to compel a ministerial act that does involve the exercise of discretion). E.g., Tex. Nat’l Guard Armory Bd. v. McCraw, 126 S.W.2d 627 (Tex. 1939). Thus, the doctrine of sovereign immunity did not apply to claims for injunctive relief seeking to force governmental officials to follow the law or to quit acting outside the scope of their authority. Henrich, 284 S.W.3d at 371; Anderson v. City of Seven Points, 806 S.W.2d 791, 793 (Tex. 1991); Bullock v. Calvert, 480 S.W.2d 367 (Tex. 1972); Thompson, 2003 WL 22964277. But see Potter Cnty. Attorney’s Office v. Stars & Stripes Sweepstakes, 121 S.W.3d 460 (Tex.App.—Amarillo 2003, no pet.), (suit for injunctive relief barred by sovereign immunity because there was nothing illegal about seizure of eight-liner machine).

The Texas Supreme Court explained the basis for this exception in 1945 and reiterated it in 2009. In Cobb v. Harrington, the Texas Supreme Court explained;

This is not a suit against the State. This is not a suit to impose liability upon the State or to compel the performance of its contract.... It is not an action that is in essence one for the recovery of money from the State or in which a judgment obtained would be satisfied by the payment out of funds in the State treasury. [T]he purpose of [this suit is not] to control the Land Commissioner when acting within the scope of authority lawfully conferred upon him. This action is for the purpose of obtaining a judgment declaring that respondents are not motor carriers as defined by the tax statute, and that petitioners, in endeavoring to compel respondents to pay the tax, are acting wrongfully and without legal authority. The acts of officials which are not lawfully authorized are not acts of the State, and an action against the officials by one whose rights have been invaded or violated by such acts, for the determination and protection of his rights, is not a suit against the State within the rule of immunity of the State from suit.

Cobb, 144 Tex. at 365-366 (citations omitted).

The Texas Supreme Court returned to this reasoning in the Heinrich decision where the court held: “[S]uits to require state officials to comply with

statutory or constitutional provisions are not prohibited by sovereign immunity, even if a declaration to that effect compels the payment of money. To fall within this *ultra vires* exception, a suit must not complain of a government officer’s exercise of discretion, but rather must allege, and ultimately prove, that the officer acted without legal authority or failed to perform a purely ministerial act. Compare Epperson, 42 S.W.2d at 231 (“the tax collector’s duty ... is purely ministerial”) with Catalina Dev. Inc. v. County of El Paso, 121 S.W.3d 704, 706 (Tex. 2003) (newly elected commissioners court immune from suit where it “acted within its discretion to protect the perceived interests of the public” in rejecting contract approved by predecessor) and Dodgen, 308 S.W.2d at 842 (suit seeking “enforcement of contract rights” barred by immunity in the absence of any “statutory provision governing or limiting the manner of sale”). Thus, *ultra vires* suits do not attempt to exert control over the State—they attempt to reassert the control of the State. Stated another way, these suits do not seek to alter government policy, but rather to enforce existing policy.

[W]hile a lack of immunity may hamper governmental functions by requiring tax resources to be used for defending lawsuits ... rather than using those resources for their intended purposes ... this reasoning has not been extended to *ultra vires* suits.

Heinrich, 284 S.W.3d at 372-73. State v. Riemer, 571 S.W.3d 441 (Tex. App.—Amarillo 2019)(court of appeals affirmed the denial of the plea to jurisdiction in a trespass to try title case, where plaintiffs alleged that the land commissioner acted *ultra vires* in asserting possession rights without proper authority because the disputed riverbed was not a navigable stream. The court held that an *ultra vires* claim based on the state commissioner’s possession of the disputed riverbed was not precluded merely because the commissioner had authority to make the determination of its navigability on behalf of the land office); City of Conroe v. Paxton, 559 S.W.3d 656 (Tex. App.—Austin 2018)(pet. filed)(governmental immunity is not implicated by claims that would enforce an underlying statutory or constitutional requirement that government contracts be made or performed in a certain way, leaving no room for discretion).

These types of suits for injunctive relief have been held to fall within the courts’ supervisory jurisdiction to protect against actions by officials or entities that are unconstitutional or *ultra vires*. Creedmoor-Maha Water Supply Corp. v. Tex. Comm’n on Env’tl. Quality, 307 S.W.3d 505, 513 (Tex.App.—Austin 2010, no pet.); Sw. Bell Tel. Co. v. Public Util. Comm’n, 735 S.W.2d 663, 667-68 (Tex.App.—Austin 1987, no writ). Thus, these

claims are not barred either by sovereign immunity or official immunity. Heinrich, 284 S.W.3d at 379-80.

As noted by the Supreme Court in Heinrich, often times the key to establishing entitlement to injunctive relief is proving that the suit involves a ministerial act in which the persons sued have no, discretion in the act sought to be compelled, Southwestern Bell Tel. v. Emmett, 459 S.W.3d 578, 587 (Tex. 2015); Heinrich, 284 S.W.3d at 371; Bagg v. Univ. of Tex. Med. Branch, 726 S.W.2d 582, 584-85 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1987, writ ref’d n.r.e.). Thus, suits such as Heinrich and Cobb are not actions where litigation is used to control a governmental entity but are instead instances where judicial action is necessary to reassert the control of the state and, thus, do not alter public policy but rather ensure public policy is followed by officials. Heinrich, 284 S.W.3d at 372-73.

Thus, suits of injunctive relief are barred by sovereign immunity if the purpose of the suit is to restrain a governmental entity or officials in the exercise of discretionary or constitutional authority. Mega Child Care, Inc., 145 S.W.3d 170, 198 (Tex. 2004). See also City of El Paso v. Heinrich, 284 S.W.3d 366, 372-73 & n.6 (Tex. 2009). Even *ultra vires* suits, which are the apposite of a suit to control state action, “must not complain of a governmental officer’s exercise of discretion but rather must allege, and ultimately prove, that the officer acted without legal authority or failed to perform a purely ministerial function.” *Id.* The Texas Supreme Court explained, that, “In *IT-Davy*, we distinguished permissible declaratory-judgment suits against state officials ‘allegedly act[ing] without legal or statutory authority’ from those barred by immunity: ‘In contrast [to suits not implicating sovereign immunity], declaratory-judgment suits against state officials seeking to establish a contract’s validity, to enforce performance under a contract, or to impose contractual liabilities are suits against the State. *That is because such suits attempt to control state action by imposing liability on the State.*’ *Id.* at 371-72 (internal quotations and citations omitted; italics in original).

Thus, the Supreme Court in Heinrich distinguished that case from another case the Court had recently decided, Houston Munic. Employees Pension v. Ferrell, 248 S.W.3d 151 (Tex. 2007), because Ferrell’s suit sought review of the pension board’s discretionary decision making. Heinrich, 284 S.W.3d at 371, fn 3. The Court pointed out that Ferrell’s suit might not have been barred by sovereign immunity if he had alleged the pension board was clearly violating its enabling statute. *Id.*

The fact that a state actor is granted some discretion in carrying out his duties does not automatically bar an *ultra vires* claim. Houston Belt, 487 S.W.3d at 163-64. Thus, where discretion is limited or confined by the terms of a statute, ordinance, etc., the official’s actions are *ultra vires* when he exercises discretion in a many

inconsistent with the statute, ordinance, etc., that grants him discretion. *Id.* City of Conroe v. Paxton, 559 S.W.3d 656 (Tex. App.—Austin 2018)(pet. filed)(governmental immunity is not implicated by claims that would enforce an underlying statutory or constitutional requirement that government contracts be made or performed in a certain way, leaving no room for discretion).

With regard to remedies available for ultra vires claims, in *Heinrich*, the Texas Supreme Court held that a plaintiff can obtain prospective injunctive relief with a general ability to sue the State and governmental entities for equitable relief. *Heinrich*, 284 S.W.3d at 375-76. See also *Labrado v. County of El Paso*, 132 S.W.3d 581, 593 (Tex.App.—El Paso 2004, no pet. h.); *Tex. A&M Univ. v. Thompson*, 2003 WL 22964277 (Tex.App.—Austin 2003, no pet. h.); *Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. City of Amarillo*, 2005 WL 2367770 (Tex.App.—Amarillo 2005).

At the same time, a party cannot seek to avoid the defense of sovereign immunity by dressing up a suit for money damages as a claim for equitable relief. As noted by the Fourteenth Court of Appeals:

In *Cobb*, the complainants brought suit to obtain a judgment declaring that ... state officials were ... acting wrongfully and without legal authority. The court held that this was not a suit against the state and thus was not barred by sovereign immunity. The court emphasized that the complainants were not seeking to impose liability on the state or to compel performance of a contract.

*TRST Corpus, Inc., v. Financial Center, Inc.*, 9 S.W.3d 316, 323 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1999, pet. denied); see *Smith v. Lutz*, 149 S.W.3d 752 (Tex.App.—Austin 2004, no. pet. h.)(not released for publication); *Freedman v. Univ. of Houston*, 110 S.W.3d 504 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2003, no pet. h.); *Bell v. City of Grand Prairie*, 221 S.W.3d 317 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2007). The courts are obligated to look at the real nature of the relief sought. Thus, when the suit primarily seeks money damages, adding a claim for declaratory or injunctive relief will not allow the plaintiff to circumvent the bar to suit and liability created by sovereign immunity. *Id.*; *Bell v. City of Grand Prairie*, 160 S.W.3d 691, 693-94 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2005, no pet.).

In *Smith*, the Austin Court notes that the plaintiff did not have a legitimate declaratory judgment claim because he could not point to anything other than the contract, such as a statute, that would require the university to take the actions in question. 149 S.W.3d at 752. Therefore, the court found the declaratory judgment claim was a pretext to bring a suit for breach of contract. *Id.* The Austin Court explained that, in its

opinion, all declaratory judgment claims involving contracts with the state are barred by sovereign immunity. *Id.* “[D]eclaratory-judgment actions brought against state officials seeking to establish a contract’s validity, to enforce performance under a contract, or to impose contractual liabilities *are* considered suits against the state because they seek to control state action or impose liability on the state. This second category of declaratory actions may not be maintained without legislative permission.” *Id.* at 759-760 (emphasis in original). Following the rationale of the Austin Court of Appeals, a party that enters into a contract with a state agency or a subdivision of the state waives its right to use the Declaratory Judgment Act to determine its obligations and rights under the contract. See *id.*

This bar applies regardless of the way in which the claim is framed. See *IT-Davy*, 74 S.W.3d at 854; see also, e.g., *Chambers—Liberty Ctys. Navigation Dist. v. State*, Nos. 17-0365 ~consolidated with~, 17-0404, 62 Tex. Sup. Ct. J. 969, 2019 Tex. LEXIS 445 (May 10, 2019)(cannot circumvent sovereign immunity by labeling suit for money damages, a claim for “restitution”); *City of Houston v. Williams*, 216 S.W.3d 827 (Tex. 2007) (firefighters’ suit for declaratory judgment was, in fact, a claim for money damages and, thus, required a waiver of the city’s sovereign immunity). When the only injury alleged is in the past and the only plausible remedy is an award of money damages, a declaratory judgment claim is barred by sovereign immunity. *Bell v. City of Grand Prairie*, 221 S.W.3d 317 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2007). However, where the firefighters’ suit for declaratory and injunctive relief would affect determination of seniority going forward, sovereign immunity did not bar the suit. *Id.*

At the same time, the fact that prospective equitable relief will result in the payment of money by a governmental entity or the mere inclusion of a claim for money damages does not mean that plaintiff is bringing a declaratory judgment act claim purely as a pretext for a breach of contract claim. *Heinrich*, 284 S.W.3d at 371-373; *Labrado v. County of El Paso*, 132 S.W.3d 581, 593-94 (Tex.App.—El Paso 2004 no pet. h.); see also *City of El Paso v. Waterblasting Techs., Inc.*, 491 S.W.3d 890 (Tex. App.—El Paso 2016, no pet.) (applying similar analysis to competitive bidding for projects paid from municipal funds).. The plaintiffs in *Labrado* were seeking a declaration that the county had violated the competitive bidding statute. *Id.* The fact that they included a claim for money damages did not bar their suit for declaratory relief on the issue of whether the county violated the competitive bidding statute. *Id.*

The Texas Supreme Court’s decision in *Heinrich* does clarify what monetary relief can be obtained in suits seeking declaratory, injunctive, and mandamus relief. Ms. Heinrich brought suit against the El Paso

Fireman and Policemen’s Pension Fund after her pension payments were reduced by 1/3. Heinrich, 284 S.W.3d at 369. The pension reduced her payment by 1/3 because her son had reached age 23 and they had begun paying 1/3 of the pension amount to him. *Id.*, at p.6. Heinrich sued alleging that the reduction in her pension payment was in violation of the statute governing the pension fund. *Id.* In the suit, Heinrich sought an injunction compelling the pension to pay her both for the fund they had withheld in the past as well as to make payments to her equal to 100% of the pension amount in the future. *Id.* After holding that sovereign immunity did not bar her claims and that pension fund board members in their official capacity had violated the applicable statute, the Supreme Court turned to the question of what relief could be granted to Ms. Heinrich. *Id.*, at p. 9. The Court noted that, while the equitable claims were not barred by sovereign immunity, the relief Ms. Heinrich sought might revive sovereign immunity. “But the *ultra vires* rule is subject to important qualifications. Even if such a claim may be brought, the remedy may implicate immunity.” Heinrich, 284 S.W.3d at 373. The Court then explained that retrospective monetary relief is generally barred by sovereign immunity. *Id.* at 373-374. “This does not mean, however, that the judgment that involves the payment of money necessarily implicates immunity.” *Id.* at 374. The Supreme Court then acknowledged that drawing a line on what relief could be granted without running afoul of sovereign immunity was “problematic.” Ultimately, the Supreme Court held that “a claimant, who successfully proves an *ultra vires* claim is entitled to prospective injunctive relief as measured from the date of injunction.” *Id.* p. 376. In doing so, the Supreme Court specifically overruled a portion of its holding in State v. Epperson, 42 S.W. 2d 228 (Tex. 1931). The Court explained that, to the extent the Epperson decision allowed recovery of retrospective monetary relief, that holding was overruled by Heinrich. *Id.* At the same time, the Supreme Court acknowledged that it is frequently difficult to distinguish between retrospective and prospective relief. Heinrich, 284 S.W.3d at 375. “That the programs are also compensatory in nature does not change the fact they are part of a plan that operates prospectively....” *Id.* (internal quotations and citations omitted). The Texas Supreme Court acknowledged that the United States Supreme Court had previously upheld, as prospective relief, a trial court order requiring state officials to spend six million dollars on education to remedy the effects of segregation. *Id.*

The Heinrich decision clearly sets out the limited circumstances in which a suit can be maintained based on a claim of *ultra vires* actions of government employees or officials in their official capacity. *Id.* “To fall within this *ultra vires* exception, a suit must not complain of a government officer’s exercise of

discretion, but rather must allege, and ultimately prove, that the officer acted without legal authority or failed to perform a purely ministerial act.” *Id.* at 372. In re Smith, 333 S.W.3d at 585. Alternatively, the suit must allege that the official had limited discretion and exercised his discretion in a manner inconsistent with the statute, ordinance or regulation that granted him that authority. Houston Belt, 487 S.W.3d at 163-64.

However, the suit need not be brought against the governmental official who first took the *ultra vires* act. See Parker v. Hunegnaw, 364 S.W.3d 398 (Tex.App.—Houston [14<sup>th</sup> Dist.] 2012). Parker, the mayor of the City of Houston, contended that she was not the proper party to the suit because she was not in office at the time of the acts complained of by the plaintiff. *Id.* The Fourteenth Court of Appeals rejected this argument noting that the plaintiff’s claim was not merely about the official’s act of purchasing the property but rather the wrongful possession under a claim of ownership. *Id.*

Following Heinrich, the Austin Court of Appeals held that *ultra vires* claims cannot challenge a decision made by a state agency that has exclusive jurisdiction over a particular matter. Creedmoor-Maha Water Supply Corp. v. Tex. Comm’n on Env’tl. Quality, 307 S.W.3d 505, 517-18 (Tex.App.—Austin 2010, no pet.). In this case, the Austin Court held that the Legislature had delegated to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality exclusive authority to decide petitions for expedited consideration of obtaining an alternate water supply company. *Id.* The Austin Court held that, because the Legislature had given the TCEQ exclusive jurisdiction, an *ultra vires* suit could not be based upon the TCEQ reaching “an incorrect or wrong result when exercising its delegated authority.” *Id.* The Austin Court reasoned that, because the TCEQ had authority to decide whether to grant the petition, it did not act without authority and could not be said to have acted *ultra vires*. *Id.*

Furthermore, the Texas Supreme Court in Heinrich held that, because *ultra vires* suits are predicated upon officials acting without legal authority, the proper defendants to such suits are the officials. *Id.* at 373. The Court concluded that suits complaining of *ultra vires* actions may not be brought against a governmental unit possessed of sovereign immunity, but must be brought against the allegedly responsible government actor in his official capacity.

When a plaintiff’s “allegations and requested declaration are, in substance, *ultra vires* claims [and the Plaintiff] sued only the [governmental entity] rather than ... officials acting in their official capacities... under Heinrich, the [governmental entity] retains its sovereign immunity in this case and Texas courts are without subject-matter jurisdiction to entertain” the suit. Tex. Dep’t of Ins. v. Reconveyance Servs., Inc., 306 S.W.3d 256, 258-59 (Tex. 2010) (reversing denial of plea to the jurisdiction based on failure to bring suit officials in

their official capacity). But see Rusk State Hospital v. Black, 392 S.W.3d at 95, 101, 103-06 (immunity from suit implicates and impacts a trial court’s jurisdiction, although the members of the Texas Supreme Court disagree on whether its impacts subject-matter jurisdiction or personal jurisdiction);

Following Heinrich, a plaintiff would be wise to quickly move forward with a hearing on their application for injunctive relief. He should put on all his evidence in support of an injunction and should do so even if the court is taking up a defendant’s plea to the jurisdiction. By following this strategy, the plaintiff commences the clock on the date from which prospective relief can begin to run under the Heinrich decision. *Id.*

Recently the Texas Supreme Court has suggested that if a statute offers a remedy, including monetary relief, a plaintiff may not be able to pursue a *Heinrich* ultra vires claim. See In re Nestle USA, Inc., 359 S.W.3d 207, 208 (Tex. 2012). The petitioners in Nestle USA brought an original proceeding in front of the Texas Supreme Court seeking a declaration that the Texas franchise law was unconstitutional, and seeking an injunction prohibiting the comptroller from collecting the taxes as well as a writ of mandamus ordering the comptroller to refund taxes that had been collected from 2008 to 2011. *Id.* at 208. The Supreme Court held that because the Legislature had created a comprehensive statute covering a particular subject and offered a means of obtaining monetary relief, the plaintiff must comply with the statute. *Id.* This holding can be seen as holding that Heinrich ultra vires claims are not available when a statutory frame work waives immunity and provides full relief. See *id.*

Additionally, the Declaratory Judgment Act (“(“DJA)”) provides a means by which a party in litigation with a governmental entity can recover its attorney’s fees. Tex. A&M Univ.-Kingsville v. Lawson, 127 S.W.3d 866 (Tex.App.—Austin 2004 pet. denied); TML v. Prudential Ins. Co. of America, 144 S.W.3d 600 (Tex.App.—Austin 2004, pet. denied). However, the Declaratory Judgment Act is not a general waiver of sovereign immunity; it “does not enlarge a trial court’s jurisdiction, and a litigant’s request for declaratory relief does not alter a suit’s underlying nature. Heinrich, 284 S.W.3d at 370. See Zurich Am. Ins. Co. v. Diaz, 566 S.W.3d 297 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2018)(pet. filed).

Private parties cannot circumvent the State’s sovereign immunity... by characterizing a suit for money damages... as a declaratory-judgment claim”). A party need not prevail on its suit under the DJA in order to recover its attorney’s fees. Tex. A&M Univ.-Kingsville v. Lawson, 127 S.W.3d at 874-875. “A trial court may award just and equitable attorney’s fees to a non-prevailing party.” *Id.*

An amendment to the Code Construction Act throws doubt on the assumption that the DJA affects a

waiver of the State’s immunity from suit. TEX. GOV’T CODE § 311.034. By contrast, the Supreme Court has expressly held that the governmental immunity of municipal corporations is waived by the DJA. Tex. Educ. Agency v. Leeper, 893 S.W.2d 432 (Tex. 1994). In Leeper, the court held that the DJA’s joinder provision waived municipal corporations’ immunity from liability for attorney’s fees by requiring their joinder to DJA suits. As opposed to municipal entities, the State need not be joined to such suits. See TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 37.006(b). Section 311.034 precludes this provision from acting as a waiver of immunity, because a joinder provision shall not be construed as a waiver of immunity unless the provision expressly includes the State as a necessary party.

#### 4. Sovereign Immunity Applies to Suits Involving Governmental Entities’ Ownership in Land.

Sovereign immunity even bars suits seeking declaratory relief regarding a governmental entity’s ownership of real property. Lesley v. Veterans Land Bd. Of State, 352 S.W.3d 479, 484 (Tex. 2011); Tex. Parks & Wildlife v. The Sawyer Trust, 354 S.W.3d 384 (Tex. 2011). Lesley involved a suit to determine ownership of mineral rights under properties owned by the Veterans Land Board. The Supreme Court held that because the plaintiffs were bringing a “suit for land” the VLB was immune from suit and the trial court thus lacks jurisdiction. *Id.* In Sawyer, the Supreme Court held that sovereign immunity barred the plaintiff’s suit for declaratory relief and/or suits for trespass to try title to land. Texas Parks & Wildlife v. The Sawyer Trust, 354 S.W.3d 384 (Tex. 2011). However, the court affirmed the right of a land owner to bring an ultra vires claim against a governmental official claiming that she is wrongfully claiming ownership or possession of property set out in its opinion State v. Lain, 162 Tex. 549, 349 S.W.2d 579 (1961). The Sawyer Trust, 354 S.W.3d at \_\_\_. See also Chambers—Liberty Cty. Navigation Dist. v. State, Nos. 17-0365 ~consolidated with~, 17-0404, 62 Tex. Sup. Ct. J. 969, 2019 Tex. LEXIS 445 (May 10, 2019)(Supreme Court held state properly plead ultra vires claim against conservation district’s commissioners where it alleged they were commissioners asserting control over state property and sought prospective relief, however, the Court was careful to explain that its holding only allows the State’s claims to go to trial, not whether the State will ultimately win on the present facts); Hearts Bluff Game Ranch, Inc., v. State, 381 S.W.3d at 489 (Texas Supreme Court refused to find a waiver of immunity because pleadings did not allege a legal basis on which the governmental entity would be left weighing whether “to act in the best interests of the people versus defending lawsuits”); State v. Riemer, 571 S.W.3d 441 (Tex. App.—Amarillo 2019)(court of appeals affirmed the denial of the plea to jurisdiction in a trespass to try title case, where

plaintiffs alleged that the land commissioner acted *ultra vires* in asserting possession rights without proper authority because the disputed riverbed was not a navigable stream. The court held that an *ultra vires* claim based on the state commissioner’s possession of the disputed riverbed was not precluded merely because the commissioner had authority to make the determination of its navigability on behalf of the land office).

Texas courts continue to analyze the application of the Heinrich and Lain principles to cases involving ownership of real property. Parker v. Hunegnaw, 364 S.W.3d 398 (Tex.App.—Houston [14<sup>th</sup> Dist.] 2012) is a good example of this. Because of his extensive international travel, the plaintiff in Parker executed a durable power of attorney granting a third party the right to convey specific lots the plaintiff owned in the Houston. Unbeknownst to plaintiff, his agent conveyed lots not covered by the durable power of attorney to the City of Houston. The plaintiff then brought suit against Parker, the mayor of Houston, in her official and individual capacity, to “quiet title” as well as for a declaration that the deeds conveying the property to the City were void and an injunction prohibiting Parker from continuing to possess the property. The allegations and relief sought in plaintiff’s pleadings made it clear that ownership and control of the lot was the only relief he was seeking against Parker. *Id.* Parker filed a plea to the jurisdiction contending the claims were barred by governmental immunity.

The Fourteenth Court of Appeals, initially, determined what claims the plaintiff was bringing against Parker. The Court noted that [Parker] was not seeking declaratory relief or even a suit to “quiet title.” *Id.* The Court concluded that the plaintiff was bringing a trespass to try title action because he was seeking a determination of ownership of the lots and resolving competing claims to property. *Id.* The Court then evaluated whether a trespass to try title claim can form the basis of a Heinrich *ultra vires* claim. *Id.* The court noted that an *ultra vires* claim will allow plaintiff to obtain perspective declaratory and injunctive relief. *Id.*

In determining if immunity barred the claims against Parker, the Fourteenth Court of Appeals analyzed the Texas Supreme Court’s decision in State v. Lain, 349 S.W.2d 573 (Tex. 1961), Sawyer Trust, and BP Am. The Court of Appeals began its analysis by reviewing the Texas Supreme Court’s reasoning in Lain. It noted that a suit for recovery of title and possession of real property is not a suit against the State but is a suit against the officials asserting ownership and right to possession on behalf of the State. *Id.*

One who takes possession of another’s land without legal title is no less a trespasser because he is a state official or employee, and the owner should not be required to obtain

legislative consent to institute suit to oust him simply because he asserts a good faith but overzealous claim that title or right to possession is in the state and he is acting for and on behalf of the state . . . [A] plea of sovereign immunity by government officials will not be sustained in a suit by the owner of land with the right to possession when the governmental entity has neither title nor right of possession.

*Id.* (quoting Lain, 349 S.W.2d at 581-82).

The Court of Appeals then noted that the Texas Supreme Court in Sawyer Trust rejected the argument that a trespass-to-try-title suit against an official is barred by immunity because the plaintiff is seeking relief binding a governmental entity, not the official. *Id.* The Court then noted that the Heinrich decision recognizes that *ultra vires* suits are suits which are for all practical purposes are suits against the state, yet the proper defendant is an official in his official capacity. *Id.* Finally, the Court rejected Parker’s argument that the evidence she submitted to the trial court established that the City was the rightful owner of the property. The Court of Appeals noted that Parker’s plea to the jurisdiction challenged only the adequacy of the plaintiff’s pleadings which affirmatively demonstrated jurisdiction. Accordingly, the Court found that the plea to the jurisdiction was properly denied. Parker v. Hunegnaw, 364 S.W.3d 398 (Tex.App.—Houston [14<sup>th</sup> Dist.] 2012).

The Court also rejected Parker’s argument that Lain’s holding did not apply because she had committed no unlawful act since she became mayor after the City purchased the property at issue. Parker v. Hunegnaw, 364 S.W.3d 398 (Tex.App.—Houston [14<sup>th</sup> Dist.] 2012). The Court rejected this argument noting that the plaintiff’s claim was not merely about the official’s act of purchasing the property but rather the wrongful possession under a claim of ownership. *Id.*

Additionally, sovereign immunity does not bar claims for violation of the constitution, including takings claims, or *ultra vires* claims. City of Dallas v Stewart, 361 S.W.3d 562 (Tex. 2012); Sawyer Trust at 390. While the Supreme Court acknowledges that prior to 1980 its opinions could be read to hold that sovereign immunity barred takings claims (see Sawyer Trust), following its decision in Steele v. City of Houston, 603 S.W.2d 786 (Tex. 1980), the Supreme Court has consistently held that immunity does not bar constitutional claims, including takings claims. City of Dallas v Stewart, 361 S.W.3d 562 (Tex. 2012). To establish a taking of property the plaintiff is required to plead and prove that the government exercised dominion and control over the property. Sawyer Trust at 390, 391.



## 5. Sovereign Immunity in Suits Between Governmental Entities.

Texas courts have begun to face the problem of applying sovereign immunity doctrine in cases brought by one governmental entity against another governmental entity. While the law in this area is unsettled, it appears that sovereign immunity protects the State from suits by other governmental entities, but does not protect other governmental entities from suit by the State. In *re Lazy W District No. 1*, 493 S.W.3d 538 (Tex. 2016) (holding a water district could assert immunity from suit even against a suit for condemnation of an easement by another governmental entity).

In *Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. City of Sunset Valley*, 146 S.W.2d 637 (Tex. 2004), the Court held that sovereign immunity bars claims *against a state agency* by a city. The City of Sunset Valley brought suit against TxDOT for an unconstitutional taking, a breach of the Texas Transportation Code, and common-law nuisance. *Id.* The City prevailed at trial, and the judgment was affirmed in part on appeal. *Id.* The Supreme Court reversed and rendered judgment for TxDOT, finding all the City’s claims, except its taking claim under Article 1, section 9 of the Texas Constitution, were barred by sovereign immunity. *Id.* at 641-644.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequently, the Supreme Court has also held that sovereign immunity bars suit *by the state* against a home-rule city. *City of Galveston v. State of Tex.*, 217 S.W.3d 466, 468-69 (Tex. 2007). This suit arose from damage to a state highway allegedly caused by the city’s negligence regarding the placement and maintenance of water lines in close proximity to the highway. While the state and the city entered into an inter-governmental contact in 1982 for construction of state highway and calling for the city to relocate certain utilities, the state did not bring suit under either the TCA or Chapter 2217. *Id.*

The majority began its analysis by noting that, “Political subdivisions in Texas have long enjoyed immunity from suit when performing governmental functions like that involved here. ... [And] the Legislature has mandated that no statute should be construed to waive immunity absent clear and unambiguous language.” *Id.* at 469. “This high standard is especially true for home-rule cities like Galveston. Such cities derive their powers from the Texas Constitution, not the Legislature.” *Id.* The majority went on to state that the presumption of immunity was particularly appropriate in suits between governmental entities. “This heavy presumption in favor of immunity arises not just from the separation-of-powers principles but from practical concerns. In a world with increasingly complex webs of government units, the Legislature is better suited to make the distinctions, exceptions and

limitations that different situations require.” *Id.* at 469. The majority then points out that the Legislature has recently endeavored to steer resolution of governmental entities away from litigation. *Id.*

The majority then noted that the state has the power to waive a city’s or other governmental entity’s sovereign immunity. *Id.* at 471. “This is not a question of power but of authority. ... The State has the power to waive immunity from suit for cities, but no authority to do so without the Legislature’s clear and unambiguous consent. There is no such authority here.” *Id.* Thus, the court held the state’s suit against the city was barred by sovereign immunity. *Id.* See *Nueces County v. San Patricio County*, 246 S.W.3d 651, 652 (Tex. 2008) (per curiam); see also *City of Friendswood v. Horn*, 489 S.W.3d 515 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2016, no pet.) (city acquiring storm-damaged lots and amending deed restrictions to incorporate FEMA restrictions was in furtherance of flood control, and therefore governmental).

The court then offered three policy reasons for finding there was no waiver for claims brought by the state against political subdivisions and local governmental entities. If “levee or skyscraper collapses, insure of fault and causation pale in comparison to issues of who can bear and repair such staggering losses. These are precisely the kinds of issues more suited to the Legislature than the court.” *City of Galveston*, 217 S.W.3d at 472. Next, “there are jurisdictional problems in asking courts to enforce a judgment against a government entity, even if it’s a local one. ... Will courts order [local governments] to raise taxes, or impound funds for police, fire or sanitation workers so the State can collect? Or will the court order execution on city property—perhaps its parks, buses, water works, or airports.” *Id.* at 472. Finally, the court found it would be fundamentally unfair to allow the state to use sovereign immunity to avoid suits by local governments and political subdivisions, but allow the state to sue and recover judgments against those entities without the Legislature having enacted a waiver of immunity. *Id.*

While the Legislature is best suited to determine when to waive immunity, the Judiciary defines the scope of the entities and claims covered by sovereign immunity, including immunity from suit. *City of Galveston*, 217 S.W.3d at 471; *Tooke*, 197 S.W.3d at 331. In defining the scope and application of sovereign immunity, the Judiciary must “take as guides both the nature and purpose of immunity.” *Wasson*, 489 S.W.3d 427, 432 (Tex. 2016). At the same time, the Judiciary must be careful not to use its power to define the scope of immunity in a way that interferes with or obviates the Legislature’s proper role and “courts should be very

ownership interest in the property taken and also ruled for TxDOT on the takings claim. *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> The Court found that the city had not demonstrated an

hesitant to declare immunity nonexistent in any particular case.” *Id.*

In a related issue, the Texas Supreme Court has questioned whether the Legislature can grant immunity, including immunity from suit, to an entity by statute. LTTTS Charter School, Inc. v. C2 Construction, Inc., 342 S.W.3d 73 (Tex. 2012). See also LTTTS Charter School, Inc. v. C2 Construction, Inc., 358 S.W.3d 725, 734 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2012, pet. pending).

The majority rejected the state’s argument, “that because the City’s immunity is derived from the State, it defies logic to allow immunity to be asserted against the State. But the major flaw in this reasoning is that it assumed the State ‘gave’ immunity to cities. This is simply not the case. Cities are not created by the State, but by the Constitution and the consent of their inhabitants. Immunity was not bestowed by the legislative or executive act; it arose as a common-law creation of the judiciary.” City of Galveston, 217 S.W.3d at 473.

The Supreme Court has likewise held that sovereign immunity barred suits by one county against another county. Nueces Co. 246 S.W.3d at 653.

Sovereign Immunity bars suits by one governmental entity against another entity for money damages even where the suit alleges that the defendant’s actions were illegal. The Nueces County decision arises out of a boundary dispute as to the border between San Patricio and Nueces counties. San Patricio prevailed on its claim establishing that land claimed by Nueces County was actually within San Patricio County. *Id.* San Patricio argued that it was also entitled to recover the amount of taxes Nueces County had collected on the property in question. San Patricio argued that sovereign immunity did not bar its claim for money damages, because Nueces County acted beyond its legal authority in collecting those taxes. *Id.* at 632. The Supreme Court rejected this argument stating that one could always argue that any tortious act, even car accidents and breaches of contract, are acts beyond a governmental entity’s legal authority. *Id.* The Supreme Court, therefore, held that the claim for recovery of taxes collected by Nueces County was barred by sovereign immunity. *Id.*

## 6. Eleventh Amendment Immunity.

In examining the scope of the defense of sovereign immunity, it is important to distinguish between common law sovereign immunity and the State’s immunity under the Eleventh Amendment of the United States Constitution. While both sovereign immunity and Eleventh Amendment immunity are based upon the notion that “[i]t is inherent in the nature of sovereignty not to be amenable to the suit of an individual without its consent,” cities and counties do not enjoy Eleventh Amendment immunity. Florida Prepaid Postsecondary Educ. Expense Bd. v. College Sav. Bank, 527 U.S. 627,

119 S. Ct. 2199, 2204 (1999) (quoting Hans v. Louisiana, 134 U.S. 1, 13 (1890)) (quoting THE FEDERALIST NO. 81 (Alexander Hamilton)); Hess v. Port Auth. Trans-Hudson Corp., 513 U.S. 30, 47, 115 S. Ct. 394, 404 (1994). See also, e.g., Mt. Healthy City School Dist. v. Doyle, 429 U.S. 274, 280, 97 S. Ct. 568, 572-573 (1977); Lincoln County v. Luning, 133 U.S. 529, 530, 10 S. Ct. 363 (1890). Thus, if you are representing governmental entities other than the State or arms of the State, your client does not enjoy the protections afforded by the Eleventh Amendment. Williams v. Dallas Area Rapid Transp., 242 F.3d 315, 319-22 (5th Cir. 2001) (setting out the test for determining applicability of Eleventh Amendment; and noting that not all entities covered by the TCA enjoy the benefits of the Eleventh Amendment).

However, one should be aware that removing a case to federal court constitutes a waiver of immunity from suit in federal court and invokes the jurisdiction of the federal court. Meyers v. State of Tex., 410 F.3d 236 (5th Cir. 2005). The federal court must still look to state law to determine if the state has retained immunity from liability. *Id.* For a more detailed review of the fundamentals of Eleventh Amendment sovereign immunity, see Ann K. Wooster, Immunity of State from Civil Suits Under Eleventh Amendment - - Supreme Court Cases, 187 A.L.R. Fed. 175 (2004).

Recent United States Supreme Court decisions regarding Congress’ authority to abrogate the States’ Eleventh Amendment sovereign immunity may have opened the door to argue, pursuant to the Tenth Amendment, that when Congress lacks the authority to abrogate the State’s sovereign immunity, it cannot circumvent that immunity by abrogation of the immunity of the state’s political subdivisions. See, e.g., Kimel v. Florida Bd. of Regents, 528 U.S. 62, 120 S. Ct. 631, 650 (2000); Alden v. Maine, 527 U.S. 706, 119 S. Ct. 2240 (1999); College Sav. Bank, 527 U.S. at 627, 119 S. Ct. at 2204; City of Boerne v. Flores, 521 U.S. 507, 536, 117 S. Ct. 2157, 2172 (1997). Exploration of the parameters and implications of such argument and its likelihood of success are beyond the scope of this paper.

Like sovereign immunity, Eleventh Amendment immunity is waived where the state consents to suit. Clark v. Barnard, 108 U.S. 426 (1883). The state’s decision to waive Eleventh Amendment immunity must be voluntary and clearly indicate the state’s intention to be subject to the jurisdiction of a federal court. Meyers, 410 F.3d at 241. Generally, courts will find waiver if (1) the state voluntarily invokes federal court jurisdiction, or (2) the state makes a “clear declaration” that it intends to submit itself to federal court jurisdiction. *Id.* The most common way in which this occurs is when the State removes a suit to federal court or intervenes in a lawsuit. See Lapides v. Bd. of Regents of the Univ. of Ga., 535 U.S. 613 (2002).

7. Liability of Cities at Common Law.

Immunity for cities is not absolute, as it is for the State, but rather depends upon whether the action giving rise to the claim was a governmental function or a proprietary activity.

Prior to the enactment of the [TCA] a city was not liable for the negligent acts of its agents and employees in the performance of governmental functions. However, it was liable for unlimited damages when negligently performing proprietary functions.

Turvey v. City of Houston, 602 S.W.2d 517, 519 (Tex. 1980) (citing City of Austin v. Daniels, 335 S.W.2d 753 (Tex. 1960)); Wasson, 489 S.W.3d 427 (Tex. 2016). The test for whether the function was proprietary or governmental was laid out in City of Galveston v. Posnainsky.

[I]n so far as municipal corporations of any class, and however incorporated, exercise powers conferred on them for purposes essentially public-purposes pertaining to the administration of general law made to enforce the general policy of the state, they should be deemed agencies of the state, and not subject to being sued for any act or omission ... [except] when the state, by statute, declares they may be. Nueces County v. San Patricio County, 246 S.W.3d 651, 652, (Tex. 2008) (internal quotations omitted).

...

In so far, however, as they exercise powers not of this character, voluntarily assumed--powers intended for the private advantage and benefit of the locality and its inhabitants--there seems to be no sufficient reason why they should be relieved from that liability to suit and measure of actual damage to which an individual or private corporation exercising the same powers for the purpose essentially private would be liable.

Dillard, 806 S.W.2d at 593 (quoting City of Galveston v. Posnainsky, 62 Tex. 118, 125, 127 (1884)); Wasson, 489 S.W.3d 427 (Tex. 2016); Holder, 954 S.W.2d at 805. Accordingly, municipal immunity from tort and contract liability rested upon the determination of whether the City was acting as an agent of state government. *Id.* If it was not, the municipality enjoyed no immunity, and was held to the same standard of care as a private citizen engaged in that activity. Wasson, 489 S.W.3d 427 (Tex. 2016); Turvey, 602 S.W.2d at 519.

The Texas Supreme Court has long identified the “benefits test”, whether the acts or contract benefit the

citizens of the municipality or the state as a whole, in deciding whether the City is acting in a governmental or proprietary capacity. Wasson Interests, Ltd. v. City of Jacksonville, 559 S.W.3d 142, 151 (Tex. 2018)(Wasson II). While it reiterated the “benefits test” in Wasson II, the court considered four factors in determining if the benefit was local or state wide. *Id.* “[W]e consider whether (1) the City’s act[ion]...was mandatory or discretionary, (2) [whether the actions] were intended to benefit the general public or the City’s residents, (3) the City was acting on the State’s behalf or its own behalf when it [acted], and (4) the City’s act ... was sufficiently related to a governmental function to render the act governmental even if it would otherwise have been proprietary.” *Id.* at 150.

The proprietary function exception to the sovereign rule of governmental immunity applies only to municipalities. At one time, the Texas Supreme Court appeared to expand the proprietary function exception beyond municipalities. In Tex. Highway Comm’n v. Tex. Ass’n of Steel Importers, Inc., 372 S.W.2d 525, 529 (Tex. 1963), the court found the building of highways to constitute a proprietary activity. As a consequence of the highway commission’s proprietary activities, the state was subject to suit and liability. *Id.* The court subsequently limited the proprietary function exception to cities. In Turvey, the court held that, “[t]he distinction between proprietary and governmental functions does not apply to counties.” Turvey, 602 S.W.2d at 519. See Nueces Co., 246 S.W.3d at 652. Likewise, “a school district is purely a governmental agency and exercises only such powers as are delegated to it by the state.” Braun v. Trs. of Victoria Indep. Sch. Dist., 114 S.W.2d 947, 950 (Tex. Civ. App.—San Antonio 1938, writ ref’d). Like counties, school districts “perform[] no proprietary functions which are separate and independent of [their] governmental powers.” Wasson, 489 S.W.3d at 950. In the City of Gladewater v. Pike, 727 S.W.2d 514, 519 (Tex. 1987) decision, the court added that “[a] proprietary function is one intended primarily for the advantage and benefit of persons within the corporate limits of the municipality rather than for use by the general public.” Consequently, because the actions of the state, its boards and agencies are intended to benefit the state as a whole rather than residents of a particular municipality, their actions are always deemed to be governmental. See *id.* Similarly, counties are ‘involuntary agents of the state without the power to serve local interests of their residents, [thus] counties have no proprietary functions; all their functions are governmental.’ Additionally, the Dallas Court of Appeals has found that open-enrollment charter schools do not perform proprietary functions, even where they lease out portions of their facilities to for profit entities. LTTs Charter School, Inc. v. C2 Construction, Inc., 358 S.W.3d 725, 734 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2012, pet.

pending). But see Wasson, 489 S.W.3d 427 (Tex. 2016) (“Therefore, in the realm of sovereign immunity as it applies to such political subdivisions—referred to as governmental immunity—this Court has distinguished between those acts performed as a branch of the state and those acts performed in a proprietary, non-governmental capacity. ... ‘Political subdivisions of States—counties, cities, or whatever—never were and never have been considered as sovereign entities.’”) (quoting Reynolds v. Sims, 377 U.S. 533, 575, 84 S.Ct. 1362, 12 L.Ed.2d 506 (1964)).

The proprietary-versus-governmental function distinction similarly applies immunity from relief incidental to these claims, such as attorney’s fees. See Wheelabrator Air Pollution Control, Inc. v. City of San Antonio, 489 S.W.3d 448 (Tex. 2016) (attorney’s fees available in suit for breach of contract for proprietary municipal function).

For the state, counties, and municipalities carrying out governmental functions, sovereign immunity precluded suit and liability in tort. Prior to 1970, governmental entities were not liable for torts committed by their officers or agents. See State v. Terrell, 588 S.W.2d 784, 786 (Tex. 1979) (the state cannot be held in tort absent constitutional or statutory waiver of immunity from suit and liability); Welch v. State, 143 S.W.2d 876 (Tex. Civ. App.—Dallas 1941, writ ref’d). Therefore, they could not be held liable under either an agency or respondent superior theory of liability for the acts of their employees, agents, and officers. *Id.*

### III. THE WAIVER OF IMMUNITY BY STATUTE AND ACTION

To understand the Tort Claims Act’s waiver of immunity, it is imperative to keep in mind that the TCA does not waive immunity from suit for tort claims generally—but only for a limited class of claims. The test of a plaintiff’s pleadings is whether they state a claim that falls within the category of claim allowed.

#### A. The Enactment of the TCA: What Law Controls?

The enactment of the TCA created a limited waiver of sovereign immunity for certain torts. Alexander v. Walker, 435 S.W.3d 789 (Tex. 2014); Univ. of Tex. Med. Branch v. York, 871 S.W.2d 175, 177 (Tex. 1994); Terrell, 588 S.W.2d at 786. See City of Bellaire v. Johnson, 400 S.W.3d 922, 924 (Tex. 2013) (unless the TCA creates a waiver of immunity then the suit is barred). See also City of Watauga v. Gordon, 434 S.W.3d 586, 589 (Tex. 2014) (“[g]overnmental immunity generally protects municipalities and other state subdivisions from suit unless the immunity has been waived by the constitution or state law.”) Through the TCA, the legislature waived immunity from both suit and liability for the claims authorized therein. See

*id.*; TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT §§ 101.021-101.025 (West 2005). The Texas Supreme Court has specifically recognized that the TCA is a limited waiver of sovereign immunity. Ryder Integrated Logistics, Inc., v. Fayette County, 453 S.W.3d 922, 927 (Tex. 2015)) (the TCA is strictly construed; immunity bars claims unless there is a clear waiver.). “The many compromises necessary to pass the Act obscured its meaning, making its application difficult in many cases... But one thing is clear: the waiver of immunity in the Tort Claims Act is not, and was not intended to be, complete.” Dallas County Mental Health and Mental Retardation v. Bossley, 968 S.W.2d 339, 342 (Tex. 1998). See County of El Paso v. Dorado, 33 S.W.3d 44, 46-47 (Tex. App.—El Paso 2000, no pet. h.) (while sovereign immunity for counties and other governmental entities is not waived by the wrongful death statute, their immunity from suit and liability in wrongful death caused by the condition or use of property is waived by the TCA); Golden Harvest Co. Inc. v. City of Dallas, 942 S.W.2d 682, 686-7 (Tex. App.—Tyler 1997, writ denied) (prior to adoption of the TCA, the state and political subdivisions had full sovereign immunity from tort liability. The Legislature did not abolish immunity when it passed the TCA; rather it waived immunity in certain limited areas); Seamans v. Harris County Hosp. Dist., 934 S.W.2d 393, 395 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1996, no writ) (“[t]he Tort Claims Act did not abolish the doctrine of sovereign immunity.... It merely operates to waive governmental immunity in certain circumstances.”). The TCA defines in detail those circumstances in which sovereign immunity has been waived and, therefore, can be held liable in tort. Bennett v. Tarrant County Water Control and Imp. Dist. No. 1, 894 S.W.2d 441, 450 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth 1995, writ denied). Accordingly, a plaintiff bringing suit under the TCA must plead and prove that his/her claim fits within the Act’s waiver of immunity. Ryder Integrated Logistics, Inc., v. Fayette County, 453 S.W.3d at 927; City of Watauga v. Gordon, 434 S.W.3d 586, 592-93 (Tex. 2014) (while plaintiff sought to bring a suit in negligence, his pleadings established that he was asserting a claim based on an assault, an intentional tort, committed by a peace officer; because the TCA does not waive liability for intentional torts, the claim was barred by immunity); Alexander v. Walker, 435 S.W.3d 789 (Tex. 2014); Tarrant County Hosp. Dist. v. Henry, 52 S.W.3d 434, 441 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth 2001, no pet.); Dorado, 33 S.W.3d at 46-48; Bennett, 894 S.W.2d at 450. See City of Bellaire v. Johnson, 400 S.W.3d 922, 924 (Tex. 2013)

The San Antonio Court of Appeals laid out the scope of the Act’s waiver of sovereign immunity:

In order for immunity to be waived under the TTCA, the claim must arise under one of the three specific areas of liability for which

immunity is waived and the claim must not fall under one of the exceptions from waiver. The three specific areas of liability for which immunity has been waived are: (1) injury caused by an employee’s use of a motor-driven vehicle; (2) injury caused by a condition or use of tangible personal or real property; and (3) claims arising from premise defects.

Medrano v. City of Pearsall, 989 S.W.2d 141, 144 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 1999, no pet.).

Except to the extent replaced by the TCA, however, common law sovereign immunity, as well as proprietary liability for municipalities, continues to control suits against governmental defendants. Pike, 727 S.W.2d at 519; Seamans, 934 S.W.2d at 395; City of Denton v. Page, 701 S.W.2d 831 (Tex. 1986); Turvey, 602 S.W.2d at 519; Dobbins v. Tex. Turnpike Auth., 496 S.W.2d 744, 748 (Tex. Civ. App.—Texarkana 1973, writ ref’d n.r.e.). Accordingly, a suit will be dismissed if a plaintiff cannot point to a clear and unambiguous waiver of immunity in the TCA. See Hillman v. Nueces Cty., No. 17-0588, 62 Tex. Sup. Ct. J. 631, 2019 Tex. LEXIS 267 (Mar. 15, 2019) (Michael Morton Act does not waive governmental immunity); Tex. Ass’n of Bus. v. Tex. Air Control Bd., 852 S.W.2d 440, 446 (Tex. 1993); Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Horrocks, 841 S.W.2d 413, 416 (Tex.App.—Dallas 1992), *rev’d on other grounds*, 852 S.W.2d 498 (Tex. 1993); Hampton v. Univ. of Tex.-M.D. Anderson Cancer Ctr., 6 S.W.3d 627, 629 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1999, no pet.) (“It is the plaintiff’s burden to allege and prove facts affirmatively showing that the trial court has subject matter jurisdiction.”).

At one time, any uncertainty over whether the TCA creates a waiver of immunity was construed in favor of the plaintiff. York, 871 S.W.2d at 177, n.3; Flores v. Norton & Ramsey Lines, Inc., 352 F. Supp. 150, 156 (W.D. Tex. 1972). Now, however, it appears that any uncertainty regarding whether the TCA creates a waiver is weighed in favor of finding no waiver and dismissing the suit based on sovereign immunity. York, 871 S.W.2d at 177, n.3. But see City of San Augustine v. Parrish, 10 S.W.3d 734 (Tex.App.—Tyler 1999, pet. dismissed w.o.j.) (applying a de novo standard of review for a plea to the jurisdiction and thereby construing the allegations in the petition as true and in favor of the plaintiff); Hampton, 6 S.W.3d at 631 (construing the plaintiffs’ petition in their favor and refusing to dismiss a case for lack of subject matter jurisdiction because the plaintiffs’ petition supported a cause of action under the TCA); Michael v. Travis County Hous. Auth., 995 S.W.2d 909 (Tex.App.—Austin 1999, no pet.) (the “waiver is to be liberally construed in order to effectuate the purposes of the Texas Tort Claims Act.”).

Plaintiffs bringing a tort claim against a governmental entity bear the burden of establishing either that their claim falls within the TCA or some other waiver of sovereign immunity. See Turvey, 602 S.W.2d at 519; City of Orange v. Jackson, 927 S.W.2d 784 (Tex.App.—Beaumont 1996, no writ) (if there is no waiver of immunity under the TCA, the plaintiff’s claim is barred by immunity); Arney, 680 S.W.2d at 874-75 (plaintiff claiming legislative waiver of immunity must demonstrate clear and unambiguous waiver, waiver is not presumed or implied); Hooper v. Midland County, 500 S.W.2d 552, 554 (Tex.App.—El Paso 1973, writ ref’d n.r.e.) (immunity still exists and precludes suit where the TCA does not apply). See also Hoffman v. Connecticut Dep’t of Income Maint., 492 U.S. 96 (1989) (“[a]s we have repeatedly stated, to abrogate the States’ Eleventh Amendment immunity from suit in federal court ... Congress must make its intention ‘unmistakably clear in the language of the statute.’”) (quoting Atascadero State Hosp. v. Scanlon, 473 U.S. 234, 242 (1985)). In the case of a municipality, waiver can be established through pleading and proving that the defendant was involved in a proprietary activity. See Pike, 727 S.W.2d at 519; Turvey, 602 S.W.2d at 519; City of San Antonio v. Cortes, 5 S.W.3d 708 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 1999, no pet.) (giving examples of governmental vs. proprietary functions). Municipalities continue to have unlimited liability in common law proprietary functions claims. Pike, 727 S.W.2d at 519; York II, 284 S.W.3d at 847-48.

## **B. Plaintiffs Must Strictly Comply With the Statute Waiving Immunity.**

Section III. A. above points out that when bringing suit under the TCA, the plaintiff’s claim must strictly comply with the waiver created by that act. Indeed, any ambiguity in a statutory waiver is construed against the plaintiff, and against jurisdiction. Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. York, 284 S.W.3d 844, 846 (Tex. 2009) (“York II”) Taylor, 106 S.W.3d at 701. “Legislative consent to waive sovereign immunity by statute must be by ‘clear and unambiguous language’ and suit can then be brought ‘only in the manner indicated by that consent.’” York II, 284 S.W.3d at 846. This is true of all waivers of immunity. A plaintiff bringing suit under a waiver of sovereign immunity must comply with the jurisdictional prerequisites for bringing suit and must make certain that his/her claim fits within the waiver created by the statute. See Prairie View A&M Univ. v. Chatha, 381 S.W.3d 500 (Tex. 2012); Hawkins v. Cmty. Health Choice, Inc., 127 S.W.3d 322 (Tex.App.—Austin 2004, no pet.); Tex. Dep’t of Criminal Justice v. Cooke, 149 S.W.3d 700, 704 (Tex.App.—Austin 2004, no pet.). In addition to complying with any conditions precedent to filing suit, the plaintiff must also establish that his claim fits within the waiver of immunity created by the statute in question. See Hawkins, 127 S.W.3d at 322; Cooke,

149 S.W.3d at 700. A plaintiff bringing a premises claim under the TCA based on a licensee’s theory, where the governmental entity is liable for special defects of which it had actual or constructive knowledge, must prove the condition at issue was a special defect in order to prevail. York II, 284 S.W.3d at 847-48.

### C. Waiver of Immunity by the Governmental Unit Being Sued.

#### 1. Waiver by Failure to Assert Immunity as a Defense.

A governmental entity can waive common law immunity from liability while immunity from suit cannot be waived. Jones, 8 S.W.3d at 638. In Jones, the supreme court noted that the two elements of sovereign immunity (immunity from liability as opposed to immunity from suit) serve different purposes that effect whether they can be waived by the governmental entity’s failure to assert them in the litigation. *Id.*

Immunity from liability and immunity from suit are two distinct principles. Immunity from liability protects the state from judgment even if the Legislature has expressly consented to the suit. Like other affirmative defenses to liability, it must be pleaded or else it is waived. Immunity from liability does not affect a court’s jurisdiction to hear a case.

In contrast, immunity from suit bars an action against the state unless the state expressly consents to the suit. The party suing the governmental entity must establish the state’s consent, which may be alleged either by reference to a statute or to express legislative permission. Since as early as 1847, the law in Texas has been that absent the state’s consent to suit, a trial court lacks subject matter jurisdiction.

*Id.* (citations omitted); University of Houston v. Barth, 403 S.W.3d 851, 854 (Tex. 2013); Tex. Dep’t of Criminal Justice v. King, 2003 WL 22937252, \*5 (Tex.App.—Waco 2003, pet. denied). See Rhule, 417 S.W.3d at 442 (subject matter jurisdiction is essential to a court’s power to decide a case, a judgment rendered without subject matter jurisdiction is fundamental error; lack of subject matter jurisdiction can be raised for the first time on appeal, and all courts have the affirmative obligation to determine if they have subject matter jurisdiction). But see Rusk State Hospital v. Black, 392 S.W.3d at 103-106 (Lehrmann, J, concurring and dissenting)(immunity from suit implicates and impacts a trial court’s jurisdiction, although three Texas Supreme Court Justices find that it primarily implicates the court’s personal jurisdiction over the entity, which

can be waived). The parties to a suit cannot even by agreement confer subject matter jurisdiction on a court. Therefore, immunity from suit cannot be waived, while immunity from liability can be waived.

Because jurisdiction is fundamental to a court’s ability to hear a case, immunity from suit may be raised at any time (it can be raised for the first time on appeal) or even sua sponte by the trial court, or by an appellate court. Rhule, 417 S.W.3d at 442 (Tex. 2013). See Jones, 8 S.W.3d at 638. See also Dallas Metrocare Serv. v. Juarez, 420 S.W.3d 39 (Tex. 2013) (additional grounds to assert immunity can be raised for the first time on appeal); Rusk State Hospital v. Black, 392 S.W.3d at 95 (immunity can even be raised for the first time on appeal where it was not raised at the trial court); See also Dallas Metrocare Services v. Juarez, 420 S.W.3d 39, 41 (Tex. 2013) (holding that additional grounds for immunity raised on appeal must be considered). The supreme court in Jones went on to hold that a plea to the jurisdiction is an appropriate means of challenging whether the plaintiff has established a waiver of immunity from suit. See Jones, 8 S.W.3d at 638. Moreover, the court went on to point out that a governmental entity is entitled to an interlocutory appeal from the denial of a plea to the jurisdiction based on immunity from suit. See Jones, 8 S.W.3d at 638 (holding that the court of appeals erred in affirming the denial of the plea to the jurisdiction without first determining whether the plaintiff’s pleading alleged facts sufficient to establish a waiver of immunity from suit).

Thus, sovereign immunity (immunity from suit and liability) should be raised not only as affirmative defenses, but also should be asserted in special exceptions and/or in a plea to the jurisdiction or a motion for summary judgment. *Id.*; Burnet Cnty. Sheriff’s Dep’t v. Carlisle, 2001 WL 23204, fn. 6 (Tex.App.—Austin 2001). A prudent attorney may want to file special exceptions and a plea in abatement. In the Estate of Lindburg decision, the Texas Supreme Court held that sovereign immunity could properly be raised when asserted in special exceptions and on appeal. Mount Pleasant Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Estate of Lindburg, 766 S.W.2d 208, 211 (Tex. 1989). In Lueck the Supreme Court held that a governmental entity is not precluded from using a plea to the jurisdiction to dispose of a suit based on immunity from suit, even if that issue could also be raised by a motion for summary judgment or special exceptions. State v. Lueck, 290 S.W.3d 876, 884 (Tex. 2009). In fact, in many cases the best course of practice is to assert immunity from suit in a plea to the jurisdiction and pursue it through an interlocutory appeal to avoid the expense of discovery and trial. *Id.* See UIL, 319 S.W.3d at 963, fn.8, (citing Emp. Ret. Sys. v. Putnam, LLC, 294 S.W.3d 309, 323, holding trial court need not allow discovery before ruling on plea to jurisdiction where party’s status as a public entity was

conclusively resolved as a matter of law). See Creedmoor-Maha Water Supply Corp v. Texas Comm’n on Environmental Quality, 307 S.W.3d 505, 513 (Tex. App.—Austin 2010, no pet)(whenever a plea to the jurisdiction is based upon the plaintiff’s pleadings, then no evidence is presented at the hearing and as a result, no discovery is needed before the court rules upon the plea to the jurisdiction); City of Galveston v. Gray, 93 S.W.3d 587, 590 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2002, pet denied); In re Hays County Sheriff’s Department, 2012 WL 6554815 (Tex.App.—Austin 2012)(Pemberton, J, concurring).

a. Taking an interlocutory appeal from an interlocutory ruling on sovereign immunity.

An interlocutory appeal can be taken regardless of the type of motion (plea to the jurisdiction, motion to dismiss or motion for summary judgment) through which immunity from suit is raised. Austin State Hosp. v. Graham, 347 S.W.3d 298 (Tex. 2011). Because section 51.014(a) gives appellate court’s jurisdiction over interlocutory appeals from rulings on sovereign immunity from pleas to the jurisdiction, motions to dismiss and motions for summary judgment, if a valid interlocutory appeal is otherwise taken sovereign immunity can be raised for the first time on appeal. Juarez, 420 S.W.3d at 41-42; Dallas County v. Logan, 407 S.W.3d 745 (Tex. 2014); Black, 392 S.W.3d at 95.

In Black, Graham brought suit against Austin State Hospital and two of its doctors alleging medical malpractice claims. *Id.* at 99. Because Graham sued both the hospital and two employees, the hospital moved to dismiss the doctors pursuant to Texas Civil Practice and Remedies Code § 101.106(e). *Id.* The doctors also moved to dismiss under sections 101.106(a) and (e). *Id.* Graham then nonsuited the hospital and asserted that its motion to dismiss was thereby mooted. The trial court denied the doctors’ motion and did not rule on the hospital’s motion. *Id.* The hospital and the doctors appealed and the Court of Appeals held that it did not have jurisdiction over the doctors’ appeal because section 51.041(a) of the Civil Practice and Remedies Code allowed the doctors to appeal only from a denial of a motion for summary judgment. *Id.* at 300.

The Supreme Court held that section 51.014 allows appeals by governmental entities or their employees where a motion in the trial court challenged that court’s jurisdiction. *Id.*

“[W]e have held under section 51.014(a) that an interlocutory appeal may be taken from a refusal to dismiss for want of jurisdiction whether the jurisdictional argument is presented by plea to the jurisdiction or some other vehicle such as a motion for summary judgment. . . . if the trial court denies the governmental entity’s claim of no jurisdiction,

whether it has been asserted by a plea to the jurisdiction, a motion for summary judgment, or otherwise, the Legislature has provided that an interlocutory appeal may be brought. The reference to plea to the jurisdiction is not a particular vehicle but the substance of the issue raised.”

*Id.* (internal quotations and citations omitted). The Court explained that there is no reason for limiting appeals under section 51.014(a)(5) which references “motions for summary judgment”, when section 51.014(a)(8) is not so limited. *Id.* The Texas Supreme Court concluded, “[t]he point of section 51.014(a)(5) . . . is to allow an interlocutory appeal from rulings on certain issues, not merely rulings in certain forms. Therefore, we hold that an appeal may be taken from orders denying an assertion of immunity . . . regardless of the procedural device used.” *Id.* at 301. See Juarez, 420 S.W.3d at 41-42 (can raise additional basis for immunity for the first time on appeal); Dallas County v. Logan, 407 S.W.3d at 746. For further discussion of interlocutory appeals see section VII D Supra.

2. Waiver by Filing Suit or Bringing Counterclaim.

Texas courts have long held that by filing suit, a governmental entity waives immunity from suit. Pelzel, 77 S.W.3d at 250; IT-Davy, 74 S.W.3d at 861 (Hecht, J., concurring); Kinnear v. Tex. Comm’n on Human Rights, 14 S.W.3d 299, 300 (Tex. 2000); Shobe, 58 S.W. at 949; Anderson, Clayton & Co. v. State, 62 S.W.2d 107, 110 (Comm’n App. 1933, op. adopted). The Supreme Court explained that “[w]hen the State invokes the jurisdiction of one of its own courts it does so not as a sovereign, but as any other litigant.” Anderson, Clayton & Co. v. State, 62 S.W.2d 107, 110 (Tex. 1933).

Subsequent to the Anderson, Clayton decision in June of 2006, the Texas Supreme Court held that when a governmental entity files suit its waives immunity from suit for counterclaims that are (1) related to (2) properly defensive to and (3) act as no more than an offset against the claims asserted by the government entity. Reata Construction Corp. v. City of Dallas, 197 S.W.3d 371 (Tex. 2006). The Supreme Court withdrew its 2004 opinion in Reata in which it held that, “by filing a suit for damages, a governmental entity waives immunity from suit for any claim that is incident to, connected with, arises out of, or is germane to the suit or controversy brought by the State.” Reata Construction Corp. v. City of Dallas, 2004 WL 726906 (Tex., April 2, 2004, op. withdrawn). In the second Reata opinion, the Supreme Court pointed out that the purpose of sovereign immunity is to protect tax resources from being used to defend suits and paying judgments. Reata, 197 S.W.3d 371 (Tex. 2006). The court acknowledged that: (1) When a governmental

entity files suit it has made a decision to expend resources to pay litigation costs; and (2) It is “fundamentally unfair to allow a governmental entity to assert affirmative claims against a party while claiming it [has] immunity as to the party’s claims against it.” *Id.* However, the court reasoned that the purpose of immunity to protect tax resources means that when a governmental entity files claims it waives immunity from suit only to the extent of allowing claims that offset the governmental entity’s recovery. “If the opposing party’s claims can operate only as an offset to reduce the government’s recovery, no tax resources will be called upon to pay a judgment, and the fiscal planning of the governmental entity should not be disrupted.” *Id.* The court went on to hold that,

“[W]here the governmental entity has joined into the litigation process by asserting its own affirmative claims for monetary relief, we see no ill befalling the governmental entity or hampering of its governmental functions by allowing adverse parties to assert, as an offset, claims germane to, connected with, and properly defensive to those asserted by the governmental entity. ... Once it asserts affirmative claims for monetary recovery, the City must participate in the litigation process as an ordinary litigant, save for the limitation that the City continues to have immunity from affirmative damage claims against it for monetary relief exceeding amounts necessary to offset the City’s claims. ... Accordingly, when the City filled its affirmative claims for relief as an intervenor, the trial court acquired subject-matter jurisdiction over claims made against the City which were connected to, germane to, and properly defensive to the matters on which the City based its claim for damages. Absent the Legislature’s waiver of the City’s immunity from suit, however, the trial court did not acquire jurisdiction over a claim for damages against the City in excess of damages sufficient to offset the City’s recovery, if any.”

*Id.* at 377. (emphasis added, citations omitted.). See State v. Fid. & Deposit Co. of Maryland, 223 S.W.3d 309, 310-11 (Tex. 2007). Thus, the holding in Reata, allows governmental entities to give a trial court jurisdiction by bringing litigation without facing any risk of having a judgment rendered against it because opposing parties can bring claims only to offset the governmental entity’s recovery. *Id.*

When a governmental entity files suit, the trial court and courts of appeal have to sort through each claim and the factual basis of each claim to determine which claims are germane to and connected to the

claims being brought by the governmental entity. State v. Fid. & Deposit Co. of Maryland, 223 S.W.3d 309, 310 (Tex. 2007).

In Sweeny Community Hospital v. Mendez, the First Court of Appeals did a detailed analysis of when claims are connected to and germane to claims brought by the governmental entity. Sweeny Community Hosp. v. Mendez, 226 S. W.3d 584 (Tex.App.–Houston [1<sup>st</sup> Dist.] 2007). Sweeny Community Hospital sued Mendez for breach of contract. Mendez brought counterclaims for breach of contract, fraud, retaliation under section 161.134 of the Health & Safety Code, retaliation under section 161.134 of the Health & Safety Code, tortious interference, and defamation. *Id.* The hospital admitted that by filing suit it waived immunity as to Mendez’s claims for breach of contract and fraud, but challenged the trial court’s jurisdiction to entertain Mendez’s other claims. *Id.*

The court began its legal analysis by noting that the dictionary defines “germane” as “closely akin,” “relevant and appropriate,” “closely or significantly related,” and “relevant and pertinent.” *Id.* Based on these definitions, the court of appeals held that the term germane means “incident to, connect with, arises out of” the same set of facts, and its breadth is not narrower than what would constitute a compulsory counterclaim. Sweeny Community Hosp. v. Mendez, 226 S. W.3d 584 (Tex.App.–Houston [1<sup>st</sup> Dist.] 2007, no pet.). A compulsory counterclaim is a claim which “arises out of the transaction or occurrence that is the subject of the opposing party’s claims.” TEX. R. CIV.P. 97. Next, the court pointed out that the term connected “means united, joined or lined and joined together in sequence; linked coherently and having parts or elements logically linked together.” Sweeny Community Hosp. v. Mendez, 226 S.W.3d 584 (Tex.App.–Houston [1<sup>st</sup> Dist.] 2007, no pet.).

The First Court of Appeals held that, while the elements of the retaliation, tortious interference and defamation claims were materially different from the elements of the hospital’s claims, “the core facts are the same and determining whether Sweeny and Mendez met their obligations under the contract is necessary to the claims asserted by both Sweeny and Mendez.” *Id.*

The court then turned to the requirement that the counterclaims needed to be properly defensive to the claims of the governmental entity. Properly defensive means the “trial court does not acquire jurisdiction over a claim for damages against the governmental entity in excess of damages sufficient to offset the governmental entity’s recovery.” Riata II, 197 S.W.3d at 377. The fact that the amount of damages sought by the counterclaims exceeds the damages sought by the governmental entity does not mean the counterclaims are barred by immunity. Sweeny Community Hosp. v. Mendez, 226 S. W.3d 584 (Tex.App.–Houston [1<sup>st</sup> Dist.] 2007, no



pet.). Offset claims can include causes of action seeking punitive and actual damages. *Id.* The fact that the offset claims seek damages in excess of those sought by the governmental entity “is a curable deficiency that can be fixed by amending the pleading to seek no more damages than the governmental entity may be awarded upon final trial.” *Id.*

The waiver of immunity from suit is effectuated regardless of the form in which the claims are made. The Texas Supreme Court held that the waiver of immunity from suit is waived regardless of whether the claims are asserted by the entity as the plaintiff or intervenor. “[W]e see no substantive difference between a decision by the City to file an original suit and the City’s decision to file its claim as an intervenor...” *Reata*, 2006 WL 1792219. Claims for relief asserted by counterclaim have also been held to waive immunity from suit. *City of Dallas v. Saucedo-Falls*, 172 S.W.3d 703 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2005, rev’d on other grounds, 218 S.W.3d 79 (Tex. 2007)); *City of Grand Prairie v. Irwin Seating Co.*, 170 S.W.3d 216 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2005, pet. denied).

However, a governmental entity does not waive immunity if it brings suit seeking to impose a monetary penalty to enforce a substantive prohibition against unlawful conduct. *Nazari v. State*, 561 S.W.3d 495 (Tex. 2018). *Nazari* involved an enforcement action under the Texas Medicaid Fraud Prevention Act, the State alleged that several dentists and their professional associations and employees fraudulently obtained Medicaid payments for providing dental and orthodontic treatments to children; the State sought penalties. *Id.* In response, the Providers asserted counterclaims and third-party claims alleging that the state and its contractor mismanaged the payment-approval process and misled the Providers regarding the requirements that the Texas Medicaid Program imposed; essentially, the providers sought to offset the penalty. *Id.* The State filed a plea to the jurisdiction to the counter-claims based on sovereign immunity and the dentist argued that under *Reata* the filing of suit waived immunity as to the counter-claims. *Id.* The Texas Supreme Court rejected this argument holding, “Because such counterclaims would interfere with the state’s ability to enforce its laws, we decline to abrogate the sovereign immunity that protects the state from their assertion. A penalty cannot be offset against the state any more than a prison sentence. Because applying the *Reata* rule to penalties would run counter to *Reata* itself and would thwart the primary justifications underlying sovereign immunity’s very existence, we conclude that the rule never applies to offset a penalty.” *Id.* at 509.

The Courts of Appeals were split on whether suing for attorney’s fees invokes a general waiver of immunity from suit and made the governmental entity subject to counterclaims under *Reata*. A majority of the Courts of

Appeals held that bringing a claim for attorney’s fees alone did not constitute a general waiver of immunity. *Tex. Dep’t of Criminal Justice v. McBride*, 317 S.W.3d 731 (Tex. 2010). Compare *Bexar Metro. Water Dist. v. Educ. & Econ. Dev. Joint Venture*, 220 S.W.3d 25, 32 (Tex.App.—San Antonio, pet. dismissed); *Lamesa Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Booe*, 251 S.W.3d 831, 833 (Tex.App.—Eastland 2008, no pet.).

The Texas Supreme Court resolved this question in *Tex. Dep’t of Criminal Justice v. McBride*. The court held:

“In this case, McBride, not the Department, filed suit. In its answer, the Department denied McBride’s allegations and prayed for attorney’s fees and costs incurred in defending the case. Other than fees and costs, the Department asserted no claims for relief. Unlike *Reata*, in which the City injected itself into the litigation process and sought damages, the Department’s request for attorney’s fees was purely defensive in nature, unconnected to any claim for monetary relief. When that is the case, a request for attorney’s fees incurred in defending a claim does not waive immunity under *Reata*...” *Tex. Dep’t of Criminal Justice v. McBride*, 317 S.W.3d 731 (Tex. 2010).

Also because recovery under a counterclaim brought without a waiver of sovereign immunity offsets any recovery by the governmental entity bringing claims, the dismissal of the governmental claims by summary judgment or otherwise means the counterclaims must be dismissed based on sovereign immunity. *Employees Ret. Sys. of Tex. v. Putnam*, 294 S.W.3d 309, 325 (Tex.App.—Austin 2009, no pet.).

The significance of the *Reata* decision is minimized by the fact that the legislature has waived immunity from suit for breach of contract actions against cities, school districts, junior colleges, and special purpose districts as well as for some contract claims against counties. See Chap. 262 and 271 TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE. Thus, in most instances contractors will not have to assert a waiver of immunity from suit by the entity’s filing of claims as a means for maintaining breach of contract claims against governmental entities.

However, filing suit does not waive immunity from liability. Thus, by filing suit, a governmental entity subjects itself to the jurisdiction of the trial court but, in order to prevail, an opposing party must still establish a waiver of immunity from liability. See *Pelzel*, 77 S.W.3d at 250; *IT-Davy*, 74 S.W.3d at 861 (Hecht, J., concurring). But see *Meyers v. State of Tex.*, 410 F.3d at 239 (removing a case to federal court constitutes a waiver of immunity from suit in federal court and

invokes the jurisdiction of the federal court; the court must still look to state law to determine if some form of immunity from liability exists).

a. Effect of Summary Disposition or Non-Suiting Governmental Entity’s Claims

The Supreme Court has held that a governmental entity’s decision to non-suit its claims or the granting summary judgment on the governmental entity’s claims does not impact the trial court’s jurisdiction. Sharyland Water Supply Corp. v. City of Alton, 354 S. W.3d 407, 413-414 (Tex. 2011); Albert, 354 S.W.3d 368, 377 (Tex. 2011). However, the trial court retaining jurisdiction is over very little real value to parties in litigation with governmental entities, because bringing a claim by a governmental entity grants the trial court jurisdiction only creates jurisdiction to the extent of an offset. Sharyland at 413-414; Albert, at 377.

3. Waiver by Estoppel.

The San Antonio Court of Appeals has held that sovereign immunity cannot be waived by promissory estoppel. In Maverick County Water and Improvement Dist. v. Reyes, 2003 WL 22900914 (Tex.App.—San Antonio, Dec. 10, 2003, no pet.), the plaintiff, Ms. Reyes, suffered damages after a canal broke and flooded her property. After the flood, the president of the board of Maverick County Water and Improvement District (the “District”) allegedly admitted liability for Reyes’ damages and promised to compensate her. Later, the District denied Reyes’ claim in a letter. Reyes then brought suit against the District claiming breach of contract, promissory estoppel, inverse condemnation and nuisance. The appeals court agreed with the District that sovereign immunity protected it against all of Reyes’ claims. With regard to the promissory estoppel claim, the court held that the doctrine of promissory estoppel does not apply against a governmental unit when it would impair the exercise of its public or governmental functions. Because Reyes’ claim arose out of the District’s distribution of its water for irrigation and electricity purposes, the application of promissory estoppel would impair the exercise of the District’s governmental function. *Id.* at \*2.

This argument—to the extent it would work against a City carrying out a governmental function—is precluded in suits against the State, because estoppel does not apply in suits where the State is a defendant. State v. Durham, 800 S.W.2d 63, 67 (Tex. 1993). Moreover, the Supreme Court appears to have rejected the argument that the actions of a governmental entity can create an equitable waiver of immunity. Sharyland Water Supply Corp., 354 S. W.3d 407, 414.

However, the Texas Supreme Court has suggested that under certain circumstances it would find a waiver of immunity by estoppels where the governmental entities actions make it inequitable for a governmental

entity to assert immunity. See Federal Sign, 951 S.W.2d at 412 (Hecht, J. concurring). Justice Hecht’s concurring opinion in Federal Sign clearly indicated that under some circumstances a governmental entity behavior which induced the plaintiff to perform the contract would estop the governmental entity that received the benefits of the contract from asserting immunity from suit. *Id.* For many years litigants continued to bring “waiver by conduct” suits against governmental entities based on Hecht’s concurring opinion in Federal Sign and his subsequent opinions. See IT-Davy, 74 S.W.3d at 863 (Enoch, J., dissenting). Even when the Texas Supreme Court stated that it was rejecting the notion that a governmental entity can waive immunity from suit by conduct, the First Court of Appeals found that Texas Southern University had fraudulently induced performance and therefore had waived its immunity from suit by its conduct. Tex. S. Univ. v. State Street Bank & Trust Co., 212 S.W.3d 893 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2007, pet. denied). The First Court’s reasoning in State Street was clearly predicated upon the notion that because Texas Southern University “lured” performance and then disclaimed the contract, it was stopped by its behavior from asserting immunity. *Id.* Compare to Tex. Parks & Wildlife Dep’t v E. E. Lowrey Realty, Ltd., 235 S.W.3d 692, 695 n.2 (Tex. 2007) (stating that “Lowrey could only pursue a breach of contract claim against the State if he first obtained legislative consent . . .”).

More recently, the Texas Supreme Court has acknowledged that it had found waiver by estoppel in cases other than breach of contract cases. “In [State v. Biggar, 897 S.W.2d 11, 11-12, 14 (Tex. 1994)] we recognized an inverse condemnation claim [and found a waiver of sovereign immunity] in part because of the State’s bad faith in using its power to gain an unfair economic advantage over the property owner.” Hearts Bluff Game Ranch, Inc., v. State, 381 S.W.3d at 484. Thus the Supreme Court continues to acknowledge that under certain circumstances it will find a waiver of immunity by estoppels where a governmental entity would otherwise reap the benefits of unjust behavior. See *id.*

#### IV. COMMON-LAW PREMISES LIABILITY

Under the law of premises liability, landowners and those who control land and buildings can be held liable when a person is injured by a condition of or on the premises. Premises liability law developed separate from general negligence liability. Generally speaking, it has always been more difficult to prevail in a premises liability case than in a negligence suit.

The higher standard of liability in premises cases grew out of the preferential status given to landowners under British common law. According to Prosser, in a civilization based upon private ownership of land, it is important for economic development that liability not

discourage land ownership and the development of real estate. Prosser, Law of Torts at 386 (5th ed. 1984). Thus, a possessor of land is obligated only to make use of his property in a manner which does not represent an unreasonable risk of harm to others. In striking a balance between encouraging economic development and the safety of the public, the courts looked to the plaintiff’s “status” on the land to determine the owner’s duty to him. Thus, the owner’s duty depends upon whether the injured party is a trespasser, licensee, or invitee. A person injured by a dangerous condition on the premises must prove that the owner breached the duty owed to their class of premises users.

To serve the purpose of encouraging ownership and development of real property, the courts have dictated that a premises liability suit is not one of several causes of action that may be asserted against an owner/occupier -- it is the only cause of action. Pifer v. Muse, 984 S.W.2d 739, 742 (Tex.App.–Texarkana 1998, no pet.) (“If the injury was caused by a condition created by the activity rather than the activity itself, the plaintiff is limited to a premises liability theory of recovery.”). This is a matter of substantive law that cannot be overcome by the plaintiff’s artfulness in pleading his claim. Lucas v. Titus County Hosp. Dist., 964 S.W.2d 144, 153 (Tex.App.–Texarkana 1998, pet. denied) (“If the plaintiff was injured by a condition created by the activity rather than the activity itself, the plaintiff is limited to the premises liability theory of recovery.”). A plaintiff may plead a cause of action based upon premises liability and other types of causes of action. However, when a plaintiff is injured by a “premises defect” he is entitled to recover only on the premises liability cause of action, and his judgment will stand up on appeal only if he pled, proved, and obtained findings on each element of a premises case. See H.E. Butt Grocery Co. v. Resendez, 988 S.W.2d 218, 219 (Tex. 1999).

If other avenues of ordinary negligence liability were available in suits against an owner/occupier, the essential protection premises liability law provided to owners/occupiers of premises would be lost. For example, in the event a landowner could be held liable for ordinary negligence in connection with a dangerous premises condition, there would be no need for a claimant to prove the necessary elements of a premises liability case (gross negligence or the owner/occupier’s prior knowledge of the dangerous condition). As a practical matter, virtually every premises case would be tried on a negligence theory, because liability would be so much easier to establish. Lucas, 964 S.W.2d at 153 (“It is true that a negligent activity is often more advantageous to the plaintiff than a premise liability theory because of additional elements that the plaintiff may be required to prove.”).

## A. Standard of Care.

Premises liability is limited liability. Owners and occupiers of land and buildings do not owe a duty of ordinary care to all persons who come onto their premises. “In Texas, the duty owed by a premises owner or occupier is determined by the status [trespasser, licensee, or invitee] of the complaining party.” Gunn v. Harris Methodist Affiliated Hosp., 887 S.W.2d 248, 250 (Tex.App.–Fort Worth 1994, n.w.h.).

### 1. Trespasser.

A trespasser is one who enters upon another’s property without right, lawful authority, or expressed or implied invitation, permission or license. Park v. Troy Dodson Const. Co., 761 S.W.2d 98, 100 (Tex.App.–Beaumont 1988, writ denied); Mendoza v. City of Corpus Christi, 700 S.W.2d 652, 654 (Tex.App.–Corpus Christi 1985, writ ref’d n.r.e.). A possessor of land owes a trespasser only the legal duty to refrain from injuring him willfully, wantonly, or through gross negligence. Lampasas v. Spring Ctr., Inc., 988 S.W.2d 428 (Tex.App.–Houston [14th Dist.] 1999, no pet.) (“The only duty a premises owner or occupier owes a trespasser is not to injure him willfully, wantonly, or through gross negligence. [citations omitted]. Moreover, a trespasser must take the premises as he finds it, and if he is injured by unexpected dangers, the loss is his own. [citations omitted]”). Spencer v. City of Dallas, 819 S.W.2d 612, 617 (Tex.App.—Dallas 1991, n.w.h.); Weaver v. KFC Mgmt., Inc., 750 S.W.2d 24, 26 (Tex.App.–Dallas 1988, writ denied).

### 2. Licensee.

“A licensee enters land of another with the permission of the landowner, but does so for his own convenience or on business for someone other than the owner. Consent to enter may be express or implied.” *Id.*

The duty owed to a licensee is not to injure him through willful, wanton, or gross negligence. There is an exception to this rule when the: (1) occupier knows of a dangerous condition on the premises; (2) licensee does not know of the condition; and (3) condition is not perceptible to the licensee and cannot be inferred from facts within his present or past knowledge. Lower Neches Valley Auth. v. Murphy, 536 S.W.2d 561 (Tex. 1976). In the case of a dangerous condition of which the landowner has actual knowledge, he has a duty to warn of the defect or make the premises reasonably safe. State Dep’t of Highways v. Payne, 838 S.W.2d 235, 237 (Tex. 1992); State v. Tennison, 509 S.W.2d 560, 562 (Tex. 1974). Tex. Parks & Wildlife Dep’t v. Davis, 988 S.W.2d at 370.

### 3. Invitee.

An invitee has been described as one who enters on another’s land with the owner’s knowledge and for the

mutual benefit of both. Rosas v. Buddies Food Store, 518 S.W.2d 534, 536 (Tex. 1975) (citing Restatement (Second) of Torts, § 332 (1965)).

The standard of care owed to an invitee is set out in the Texas Supreme Court’s decision in Corbin:

A possessor of land is subject to liability for physical harm caused to his invitees by a condition on the land if, but only if he (a) knows or by the exercise of reasonable care would discover the condition and should realize that it involves an unreasonable risk of harm to such invitees, and ... [b] fails to exercise reasonable care to protect them against the danger.

Thus, when an occupier has actual or constructive knowledge of any condition on the premises that poses an unreasonable risk of harm to invitees, he has a duty to take whatever action is reasonably prudent under the circumstances to reduce or to eliminate the unreasonable risk from that condition.<sup>4</sup>

Corbin v. Safeway Stores, Inc., 648 S.W.2d 292, 295 (Tex. 1983); Meeks v. Rosa, 988 S.W.2d 216, 217 (Tex. 1999); Resendez, 988 S.W.2d at 219.

It is only in cases of injury to an invitee that the occupier must exercise reasonable care to inspect the premises and is charged with knowledge of dangerous conditions in which an inspection would disclose.

Even in the case of an invitee, a duty to act does not arise until there is a condition on the premises that creates an unreasonable risk of harm to users of the property. According to Corbin’s statement of duty owed to invitees, it may appear that such suits are tried upon a general negligence standard. In fact, the supreme court’s description of the invitee standard of care has encouraged this perception.

The standard of conduct required of a premises occupier toward his invitees is the ordinary care that a reasonably prudent person would exercise under all pertinent circumstances.... Liability depends on whether the owner acted reasonably in light of what he knew or should have known about the risks accompanying a premises condition.

Mendoza, 700 S.W.2d at 654; Corbin, 648 S.W.2d at 295 (“[I]n subsequent cases, we emphasized that an invitee’s suit against a store owner is a simple negligence action”).

However, one critical difference remains between premises liability for invitees and a simple negligence case. A licensee must first establish the principal element of a premises liability case, namely the existence of a dangerous condition before the defendant has a duty to act. In Izaguirre, the supreme court held that an owner/occupier’s duty arises only from the existence on the premises of a dangerous condition that could result in injury. The existence of a dangerous condition is the first element of any premises liability case. Brownsville Navigation Dist. v. Izaguirre, 829 S.W.2d 159, 160 (Tex. 1992). See Meeks, 988 S.W.2d at 306-07; Resendez, 988 S.W.2d at 219; Johnson County Sheriff’s Posse, Inc. v. Endsley, 926 S.W.2d 284, 285 (Tex. 1996); Seideneck v. Cal Bayreuther Assoc., 451 S.W.2d 752, 754 (Tex. 1970).

Izaguirre involved a man who was loading a trailer that was disconnected from its tractor with its front resting on extendable supports. *Id.* The ground was soft and muddy from rain. The front supports of the trailer were resting on a board for stability. The board broke, causing the load to shift, and resulting in the trailer rolling over on Izaguirre. Plaintiffs contended the ground should have been covered with harder material that would not have given way, or that the district should have warned of the danger of the ground shifting. *Id.* The court held that ordinary dirt did not represent a dangerous condition, and in the absence of a premises defect, the premises occupier could not be held liable. *Id.*

## **B. Common Law Premises Liability Continues to Depend Upon the Classification of the Plaintiff’s Entry Upon the Premises.**

The supreme court has been presented with numerous opportunities to abolish the common law distinctions between trespasser, licensee, and invitee, and thereby establishing an ordinary care standard of duty for landowners. The supreme court has refused, however, to eliminate the common law classification standards of liability, despite the strong urging in several concurring opinions. Nixon v. Mr. Property Mgmt. Co., Inc., 690 S.W.2d 546 (Tex. 1985). Nixon was decided years after both Tennison and Murphy. The supreme court did not modify the holdings of those two cases at all. *Id.* The only conclusion that can be drawn from

<sup>4</sup> Section 343 of the Restatement of Torts Second, from which the Texas Supreme Court established the standard of care owed to an invitee, also requires that the premises defect be one the possessor of land should expect that the plaintiff “will

not discover or realize the danger, or will fail to protect themselves against.” Corbin, 648 S.W.2d at 295. The Texas Supreme Court, however, eliminated this element of the invitee’s cause of action when it “abolished the negligence defense of assumption of the risk and the ‘no duty’ doctrine.” *Id.* at 295, fn. 1.

Nixon is that the supreme court intends that land occupiers, including governmental entities, will not be held to an ordinary negligence standard in premises liability cases. See id.; Valley Shamrock, Inc. v. Vasquez, 995 S.W.2d 302, 306-07 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1999, no pet.); Richardson v. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., 963 S.W.2d 162, 164 (Tex.App.—Texarkana 1998, no pet.).

### C. What Constitutes a Dangerous Condition?

In cases brought by an invitee or licensee, the existence of a dangerous condition is the first element the plaintiff must establish in order to prevail. Seideneck, 451 S.W.2d at 754. Not every premises condition that causes injury is a dangerous condition. See Izaguirre, 829 S.W.2d at 160. To constitute a dangerous condition, a premises defect must meet two conditions. First, the premises must constitute an unreasonable risk to the licensee or invitee. Seideneck, 451 S.W.2d at 754. Second, the condition must have been one that the plaintiff should not have anticipated under the existing circumstances. See Izaguirre, 829 S.W.2d at 160; State Dep’t of Highways and Pub. Transp. v. Kitchen, 867 S.W.2d 784 (Tex. 1993). As explained by the supreme court in Izaguirre, it is a matter of common knowledge that dirt becomes soft and muddy when wet. Id. Therefore, the premises owner should not have to warn of or make reasonably safe a condition that a reasonable and prudent person would have anticipated encountering under the applicable conditions. Izaguirre, 829 S.W.2d at 160; Kitchen, 867 S.W.2d at 786. See Cobb v. Tex. Dep’t of Criminal Justice, 965 S.W.2d 59, 62 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1998, no pet.) (a defect is an “imperfection, shortcoming, or want of something necessary for completion.”).

### D. Generally, a Defendant Landowner or Possessor Cannot be Held Liable on a Lesser Standard of Care.

An occupier being sued by a person injured on her premises has the right to claim the limitation of duty established under common law premises liability. A plaintiff who tries a premises liability case on a negligence theory does so at his own risk. See Clayton W. Williams, Jr., Inc. v. Olivo, 952 S.W.2d 523, 529 (Tex. 1997); Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. v. Bazan, 966 S.W.2d 745, 746 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 1998, no pet.); Physicians & Surgeons Gen. Hosp. v. Koblizek, 752 S.W.2d 657 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1988, writ denied). Ms. Koblizek, an invitee at the hospital, alleged that she tripped in an area where two different types of floor surfaces came together. While their pleadings alleged all of the elements of an invitee premises liability case, the Koblizeks requested that the case be submitted to the jury on a general negligence charge. Id. at 659. In accordance with the charge, the

jury found only that the hospital was negligent in allowing different surface levels to exist in between a bathroom hallway and lobby area and that this negligence was the proximate cause of the plaintiff’s injury. Id. The defendant objected to the charge as failing to contain findings essential to a premises liability cause of action and failing to include definitions and instructions necessary to define the limited nature of the hospital’s duty. Id. The court of appeals reversed and rendered a take nothing judgment based upon the plaintiffs’ failure to obtain jury findings essential to their premises liability cause of action (i.e., whether the defendant hospital knew or should have known of the condition of the floor or whether the condition presented an unreasonable risk of harm). Id. at 660. See Tennison, 509 S.W.2d at 562; State Dep’t of Highways and Pub. Transp. v. Carson, 599 S.W.2d 852 (Tex. Civ. App.—El Paso 1980, writ ref’d n.r.e.). But see State v. McKinney, 886 S.W.2d 302, 303-04 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1994, writ denied) (jury’s affirmative answer to general negligence charge was sufficient where all elements of a premises liability suit had been proven as a matter of law).

There are only two circumstances in which a premises occupant can be held liable on a lesser standard of liability. First, the occupier may waive limited liability and allow the case to proceed to the jury as a negligence case. Parker v. Highland Park, 565 S.W.2d 512, 519 (Tex. 1978). Under those circumstances, the defendant will be held to the standard of what a reasonable and prudent person would do under the same or similar circumstances. Second, the plaintiff can claim that she was injured not by a premises defect, but rather by an activity being conducted on the premises. This second group of cases are pled and tried under the “negligent activity” theory of liability.

While “negligent activity” liability is a means of circumventing the higher burden of proof in premises liability law, application is very limited. When a plaintiff is injured as a result of a “negligent activity” being conducted on the premise, the landowner is held to an ordinary care standard of liability. Keetch v. Kroger Co., 845 S.W.2d 262, 264 (Tex. 1992). “Negligent activity” liability exists only when the plaintiff was injured as a direct and immediate result of an activity conducted on the premises, rather than as a consequence of a defect in the premise. In Keetch, the supreme court held that a plaintiff can recover under the “negligent activity” theory rather than premises liability only if the: (1) injury was caused by or as a contemporaneous result of the activity; and (2) activity was the cause in fact of the injury. Id.

Keetch arose out of a slip and fall in a grocery store. The plaintiff alleged the store was negligent in spraying flowers with “Green Glo” in a way that overspray collected on the floor causing a dangerously slick condition. The trial court submitted the case to a jury

on a premises liability theory and refused to submit the “negligent spraying activity” theory. The jury failed to find that Kroger knew or should have known of the dangerous condition, resulting in a take nothing verdict. The supreme court affirmed the decision of the court of appeals, while explaining the limited application of the negligent activity liability.

Recovery on a negligent activity theory requires that the person had been injured by or as a contemporaneous result of the activity itself rather than by a condition created by the activity.

There was no ongoing activity when Keetch was injured. Keetch may have been injured by a condition created by the spraying but she was not injured by the activity of spraying. At some point, almost every artificial condition can be said to have been created by an activity. We decline to eliminate all distinction between premises conditions and negligent activities.

*Id.* (emphasis added).

Following, the rationale set forth in Keetch, the Corpus Christi Court of Appeals held that the injury must not only be contemporaneous with the injury, but the injury must occur in the immediate area where the negligent activity was being conducted. Stanley Stores v. Veazy, 838 S.W.2d 884, 886 (Tex.App.—Beaumont 1992, writ denied). As explained by the Corpus Christi court:

Our understanding of Keetch is that before submitting a negligence activity theory of recovery, a trial court should first consider from the evidence and pleadings if the injury was created by and contemporaneous to an ongoing activity.

...

[In this case], we have an ongoing activity [a Pepsi tasting display] in one area of the store and a slip and fall on a substance generated from that activity in another area of the store. Keetch says, “recovery on a negligent activity theory requires that a person has been injured by or as a contemporaneous result of the activity itself rather than by the condition created by the activity”.

[T]he evidence must show that the injuries were directly related to the activity itself.

Applying Keetch to the case before this court, there is a lack of supportive evidence to justify the trial court’s admission of a negligent activity cause of action. We find no connection between injury and the ongoing Pepsi display which would lead us to conclude that the injury occurred as a contemporary result of the ongoing activity.

*Id.* (emphasis in original).

Through Keetch and its progeny, the supreme court and the courts of appeals clearly intend for premises liability law to fulfill its historic function of providing meaningful limitations of a landowner’s liability. Specifically, if the plaintiff’s injuries are a result of the condition of the premises (i.e., a slick floor) then the case must be tried under the established principals of premises liability. Keetch, 845 S.W.2d at 264. A claimant may not avoid that limited liability simply by alleging that she was injured as a result of an “activity” carried out on the premises rather than the condition of the premises itself. See id. This same analysis is revisited by the courts in determining whether a TCA suit arises from a premises defect or from the condition or use of personal property. Simpson, 500 S.W.3d at 390.

#### **E. Proving the Owner has Knowledge of the Dangerous Condition.**

Keetch is also significant for its holding that an owner/occupier’s creation of a condition does not conclusively establish that he had knowledge that the condition was dangerous.

Proof that the premises owner or occupier created a condition which poses an unreasonable risk of harm may constitute circumstantial evidence that the owner or occupier knew of the condition. However, creating the condition does not establish knowledge as a matter of law for purposes of premises liability.

*Id.* at 266. As explained by Justice Hecht: “an employee may accidentally spray something on the floor without actually knowing it.” *Id.* at 267 (Hecht, J., concurring).

#### **F. Submission of a Premises Liability Case to the Jury.**

Premises liability cases remain exempt from the requirements of Texas Rule of Civil Procedure 277, which dictates that whenever feasible a case should be submitted to the jury on broad form questions. TEX. R. CIV. P. 277 (Vernon Supp. 2001). The disjunctive submission of a premises liability case, requiring the jury to specifically find for the plaintiff on each element

of his cause of action, is not a basis for reversal. H.E. Butt Grocery Co. v. Warner, 845 S.W.2d 258, 259-60 (Tex. 1992). Furthermore, even if a premises case is submitted in broad form, this does not abrogate the requirement that the court’s charge includes in its definitions and instructions each and every element of a premises liability cause of action. Keetch, 845 S.W.2d at 266-67; Olivio, 952 S.W.2d at 529; Univ. of Tex. Med. Branch at Galveston v. Davidson, 882 S.W.2d 83, 86 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1994, no writ) (reversing the trial court and rendering that the plaintiff take nothing because she could not recover on a general negligence theory as a matter of law).

### G. Premises Liability for Governmental Entities at Common Law.

The classification of users of governmental premises and other principles of common law premises liability had no application to governmental entities before the enactment of the TCA, because they enjoyed sovereign immunity. While the TCA constitutes a limited waiver of immunity, common law principles of sovereign immunity are still applicable in determining the extent of a governmental entity’s liability. See also City of Bellaire v. Johnson, 400 S.W.3d 922, 924 (Tex. 2013)

## V. THE TEXAS TORT CLAIMS ACT

This section of the paper addresses various provisions of the TCA as well as the cases interpreting the TCA. The discussion is broken down into the following topic areas: (1) whom is covered by the TCA; (2) under what circumstances does the Act permit suit; and (3) what are the exclusions and exceptions to liability under TCA.

One must keep in mind that the TCA is a limited waiver of immunity; meaning unless the waiver is clear then the immunity bars the plaintiff’s claims. Ryder Integrated Logistics, Inc., v. Fayette County, 453 S.W.3d at 927. To prevail on a claim under the TCA the plaintiff must plead and prove all the elements of waiver. See *id.*

### A. What Governmental Entities and Actions are Covered by the TCA?

Section 101.001 of the TCA sets forth the meanings of certain terms critical to the application of the TCA.

#### 1. Section 101.001(3), Entities and Activities Covered by the TCA.

The TCA applies only to “governmental unit[s].” See TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE §§ 101.001-101.021 (West 2005). Section 101.001(3) defines governmental units as including: (1) the state and all its agencies; (2) political subdivisions of the state (including but not limited to cities, counties, school districts, junior college

districts, water improvement districts, and water control districts); (3) an emergency service organization; and (4) any other institution, agency, or organ of government the status and authority of which are derived from the Constitution of Texas or from laws passed by the Legislature under the Constitution. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.001(3) (a copy of the entire Act is provided at the end of this paper). Just as with sovereign immunity, the TCA applies and extends to all agencies, political subdivisions, and other institutions which are derived from the state constitution and laws.” See Tarrant County v. Dobbins, 919 S.W.2d 877, 884 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 1996, writ denied); Brown v. Montgomery County Hosp. Dist., 905 S.W.2d 481, 483 (Tex.App.—Beaumont 1995, writ denied); Dillard, 806 S.W.2d at 593. But see Dallas Area Rapid Transp., 242 F.3d at 319-22 (the standard for determining the applicability of the Eleventh Amendment is different from standard for determining applicability of TCA). Under these standards, the following governmental entities have been held to be covered by the TCA:

- (a) County hospital districts and county owned hospitals, Sharpe v. Mem’l Hosp., 743 S.W.2d 717, 718 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1987, no writ); Tarrant County Hosp. Dist. v. Ray, 712 S.W.2d 271, 273-74 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 1986, writ ref’d n.r.e.); Wheeler v. Yettie Kersting Mem’l Hosp., 866 S.W.2d 32, 45 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1993, no writ);
- (b) A city owned hospital, City of Austin v. Davis, 693 S.W.2d 31, 34 (Tex.App.—Austin 1985, writ ref’d n.r.e.); Huckabay v. Irving Hosp. Auth., 879 S.W.2d 64, 66 (Tex.App.—Dallas 1993, no pet.);
- (c) Independent school districts and junior college districts, Barr v. Bernhard, 562 S.W.2d 844, 846 (Tex. 1978); Brown v. Houston Indep. Sch. Dist., 763 F. Supp. 905, 908 (S.D. Tex. 1991); LeLeaux v. Hamshire-Fannett Indep. Sch. Dist., 835 S.W.2d 49, 51 (Tex. 1992); Freeman v. Del Mar College, 716 S.W.2d 729, 771 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1986, no writ);
- (d) Community centers providing mental health and mental retardation services, Rodriguez v. Tex. Dep’t of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, 942 S.W.2d 53 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1997, no writ); Deep E. Tex. Reg’l Mental Health & Mental Retardation Servs. v. Kinnear, 877 S.W.2d 550, 564 (Tex.App.—Beaumont 1994, no writ); OP. TEX. ATT’Y GEN. NO. JM-538 (1986); and

- (e) Regional transit authorities created pursuant to state statute, OP. TEX. ATT’Y GEN. NO. MW-10 (1979).<sup>5</sup>

However, the San Antonio Court of Appeals held that the San Antonio Water System was not a “governmental unit” subject to suit, but merely a subdivision of the City of San Antonio. San Antonio Water System v. Smith, 451 S.W.3d 442, 450–51 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 2014, no pet.). “The actual status and authority of SAWS and its board derives exclusively from the city ordinance and the encumbrance documents. See Guadalupe–Blanco River Auth. v. Tuttle, 171 S.W.2d 520, 521 (Tex.Civ.App.—San Antonio) See Guadalupe–Blanco River Auth. v. Tuttle, 171 S.W.2d 520, 521 (Tex.Civ.App.—San Antonio) (per curiam) (holding members of San Antonio Electric and Gas System board of trustees, created pursuant to article 1115, article 1115, are municipal agents whose powers and duties derive solely from the contract of encumbrance and the ordinance that created board and that their powers and duties are fixed and limited to those the municipality has expressly or by necessary implication conferred on them), *writ ref’d*, 141 Tex. 523, 174 S.W.2d 589 (1943).... 174 S.W.2d 589 (Tex. 1943). Therefore, SAWS is not a “governmental unit” within the meaning of section 101.001(3) of the Texas Tort Claims Act”. *Id.*

## 2. Section 101.001(2), Employees, Agents, and Independent Contractors.

The TCA creates liability for governmental units for the acts of its employees, agents, and officers. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT §§ 101.021-101.022. The Act defines “employee[s]” as:

[A] person, including an officer or agent, who is in the paid service of governmental unit by competent authority, but does not include an independent contractor, an agent or employee of an independent contractor, or a person who performs tasks, the details of which the governmental unit does not have the right to control.

TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.001(2). When the active tort-feasor is employed by a governmental unit and is subject to the control of any officer, agent, or elected official of that governmental unit, his actions can form the basis of liability. *Id.*

Liability is limited by the statute to that which arises from the actions of paid employees. See Harris County v. Dillard, 883 S.W.2d 166 (Tex. 1994); but see

Tex. Dep’t of Family and Protective Servs. v. Atwood, 176 S.W.3d 522, 529-530 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2004, pet. denied) (foster parents of regulated foster home not employees under TCA). Still, a governmental unit can be held vicariously liable for the negligence of an unpaid volunteer. See Smith v. Univ. of Tex., 664 S.W.2d 180, 190-91 (Tex.App.—Austin 1984, writ ref’d n.r.e.). The Smith case arose out of a track and field meet sponsored by the University of Texas. *Id.* at 181. Price, the head track coach and an employee of the University, was responsible for organizing and conducting the meet. *Id.* at 183. Price appointed a volunteer, Drolla, to oversee the shot-put event. *Id.* Drolla was charged with overseeing and running the event as well as the use of the shot-put area of the stadium. *Id.* Smith alleged that Drolla was negligent in failing to establish safety guidelines regarding the use of the shot-put facilities, which Smith claimed caused his injuries. *Id.* at 189. The factor which distinguishes Smith from Harris County and any other case that may involve the negligence of a volunteer is that the plaintiff in Smith alleged that a paid employee was responsible for the volunteer’s actions. As the majority in Harris County recognized, Smith represents a way to get around the TCA’s exclusion of the actions of volunteers from the state’s waiver of immunity. See Harris County, 883 S.W.2d at 167-168, n.2; City of Dayton v. Gates, 126 S.W.3d 288, 289 (Tex.App. – Beaumont 2004, no pet. h.) (section 101.062’s liability for volunteers does not expand scope of liability under section 101.021(1)). See also Rodriguez, 942 S.W.2d at 56 (governmental entity which is highly regulated by another state agency or is dependent on federal funds funneled through regulating agency is not an employee of agency or department).

The Texas Supreme Court confronted a fact situation similar to the Harris County case. Bishop v. Tex. A&M Univ., 35 S.W.3d 605 (Tex. 2000), arose from an injury in the production of a play by the Texas A&M drama club. Bishop was injured when stabbed with a knife that was used as a prop in a play. *Id.* Another student missed the stab pad and stabbed Bishop in chest. The decision to use the knife was made by a director and a prop assistant that the court of appeals found to be independent contractors. *Id.* The court of appeals reasoned that A&M could not be held liable for negligence of an independent contractor. *Id.* The actions of the drama club and the play were also overseen by two A&M faculty members. Since the faculty members were not paid specifically for work with the drama club, the court of appeals held that the faculty members were acting as volunteers for whom the university was not liable. *Id.*

districts are not included within the definition of “governmental unit.” OP. TEX. ATT’Y GEN. NO. JM-1077 (1989).

<sup>5</sup> The Texas Attorney General’s Office opined that health



The supreme court rejected the notion that the faculty advisors were not employees when they oversaw the drama club on two different basis. First the supreme court pointed out that:

[First the] fact that Drs. Curley and Lesko [the faculty advisors] did not receive additional remuneration for their service to the university as faculty advisors is not dispositive of whether they were employees for purposes of liability under the Tort Claims Act. The evidence in support of the judgment demonstrates that although faculty members are not required to act as advisors, [A&M] considered Drs. Curley and Lesko’s service to the university as faculty advisors when calculating their overall compensation. Unlike the volunteer reserve-deputy sheriff in Harris County v. Dillard, who was never in the paid service of a governmental unit and therefore was not an employee under the Tort Claims Act, Drs. Curley and Lesko remained in the paid service of the university while advising the Drama Club and received a benefit from their advisory positions.

*Id.*

The supreme court went on to point out that the purpose of having faculty advisors precluded them from being considered volunteers. In order to gain recognition as a student organization at A&M, an organization such as the Drama Club had to have faculty advisors. The official student-organizations policy manual provides that as an advisor to an organization such as the drama club, the advisors must know the rules pertaining to A&M organizations, be aware of liability issues and advise the organization to make reasonable and prudent decisions. Based upon this provision of the student-organization manual, the supreme court found that the faculty advisors were responsible for enforcing A&M’s policies; including A&M’s policy prohibiting the use of deadly weapons. Based upon the role of the faculty advisors and the fact they were paid by the University, the court found that there was sufficient evidence to support a jury finding that the faculty advisors were acting as A&M’s employees at the time Bishop was injured and that the TCA provided that A&M was liable for the negligence of its employees that resulted in injuries to Bishop. *Id.*

Following the Bishop I rationale, a governmental entity can be held liable even when its employees are carrying out functions for which they are not directly paid. *Id.* The chances of being held liable increase if the employee serving in the unpaid position is responsible for seeing that the organizations policies and procedures are followed. See id.

The actions of independent contractors are generally excluded from liability under the TCA. The Supreme Court had the opportunity to address this issue when the Bishop case returned to the Court in 2005. Tex. A&M Univ. v. Bishop, 156 S.W.3d 580 (Tex. 2005). In Bishop II, the court had to address the question of whether the play’s directors were employees of the university or an independent contractor. The Court acknowledged its previous holding that the faculty advisors were acting as university employees in their involvement in the play where the plaintiff was injured. *Id.* at 582-82. But the court noted that the university could only be liable if one of its employees used or put into use the property that caused the injury. *Id.* at 583. The Supreme Court pointed out that the directors of the play selected the knife and the stab pad that resulted in the plaintiff’s injuries. *Id.* Therefore, the plaintiff could only prevail if the directors were employees. *Id.*

The plaintiff argued that because the university could hire and fired the directors, the university could control the props to be used in the play, the university could approve the script for the play, and the directors were paid for their work with university funds, the directors must have been employees. *Id.* The Supreme Court acknowledged that this evidence was relevant but pointed out that the TCA defines an “employee” as a person in the paid service of a governmental unit, but provides that the term “does not include an independent contractor or a person who performs tasks the details of which the governmental unit does not have the legal right to control.” *Id.* at 584. The court then looked to the factors for determining if someone is an independent contractor, namely: (1) The independent nature of his business; (2) his obligation to furnish necessary tools, supplies, and material to perform the job; (3) his right to control the progress of the work, except as to final results; (4) the time for which he is employed; and (5) the method of payment, whether by time or by the job. *Id.* at 584-85. The directors performed specialized tasks, were paid by the job, furnished their own props, had no contract with the university, and were not put on the university’s tax rolls. The court then noted that the university’s ability to terminate the directors and oversee the script and props shows only a minimum form of control. *Id.* Thus the Supreme Court found the directors were independent contractors and Texas A&M could not be held liable for their negligent use of the props in the play. *Id.* See also Univ. of Tex. Health Science Center v. Schroeder, 190 S.W.3d 102 (Tex.App.–Houston [1<sup>st</sup> Dist.] 2005, no pet.)(university was not liable for the actions of a medical student because the student was not an employee of the university). See also Marino v. Lenoir, 526 S.W.3d 403 (Tex. 2017) (resident physician was not “in paid service” of governmental unit, and governmental unit

did not have legal right of control, so she was not entitled to immunity).

The lower courts have typically followed Bishop, particularly in situations involving alleged medical malpractice. The Fourteenth Court of Appeals held that a county could not be held liable for the actions of a doctor with staff privileges at a county-owned hospital. Harris v. Galveston County, 799 S.W.2d 766, 788 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1990, writ denied). Harris was injured while he was a patient at a county hospital. *Id.* She claimed her injuries resulted from the negligence of Dr. Borne. Borne was not a county employee, but had staff privileges and was entitled to use the hospital’s facilities. *Id.* at 767. The court of appeals affirmed the entry of summary judgment in favor of the county. *Id.* at 768.

Generally, a physician is considered to be an independent contractor with respect to hospitals at which he has staff privileges. The Texas Tort Claims Act provides that an independent contractor is not an employee. Thus, if we assume the facts alleged by appellant are true, they do not establish a right of action under the Act against [Galveston County]. *Id.* See TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.001(2).

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*Id.* See TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.001(2).

### 3. Section 101.001(5), Scope of Employment.

As with respondeat superior liability, a governmental entity will be held liable only for the torts of its employees committed within the scope of their employment. Hein v. Harris County, 557 S.W.2d 366, 368 (Tex. Civ. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1977, writ ref’d n.r.e.); TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.001(5). The Act defines the “scope of employment” as being “the

performance for a governmental unit of the duties of an employee’s office or employment and includes being in or about the performance of a task lawfully assigned to an employee by competent authority.” The scope of employment, therefore, establishes the limits of the governmental liability for the acts of its employees.

Hein demonstrates the application of this principal. Hein, a Harris County employee, was shot by another Harris County employee, Marvin Carlton. *Id.* at 367. Hein and Carlton were assigned to install traffic signs in a rural area of Harris County. On the day of the accident, Carlton brought a pistol to work in order to shoot snakes encountered while installing signs. After completing their work, they went to a nearby home owned by a friend of Carlton “for the purpose of calling back to the camp to receive further instructions as was customary.” *Id.* Before they left the house, Carlton took out the pistol to show it to his friend. While attempting to remove the bullet clip, the gun accidentally discharged injuring Hein. Carlton was not within the scope of his employment at the time he shot Hein, despite the fact he went to a friend’s house to call to the sign shop in accordance with the county’s policy. *Id.*

The evidence establishes that Carlton’s negligent conduct occurred at the time when he was merely showing the pistol to a friend. He had completed the business which brought him to the friend’s house and had delayed his departure for that purpose. The rule is that when a servant turns aside, no matter how short the time, from the prosecution at the master’s work to engage in an affair wholly his own, he ceases to act for the master, and responsibility for his actions in pursuing his own business or pleasure is upon him alone. The actions of Carlton in attempting to remove the clip from the pistol ... was something wholly disconnected from his employment and not for the benefit of his employer. When he turned aside from the prosecution of his duties for the county, although for only a short time, he ceased to act for the county and the responsibility of any act done by him during this time rested on him alone.

*Id.* (citations omitted) (emphasis added).

Hein holds that any departure from an employee’s assigned work will preclude liability under the TCA. *Id.* Other courts may limit the Hein decision as holding only that when the employee’s actions bear no relationship to the performance of a governmental function, will they be held to be outside the scope of employment.

In contrast to the Hein decision is the recent Supreme Court of Texas decision in Laverie v. Wetherbe, 417 S.W.3d 748 (Tex. Apr. 7, 2017). The

plaintiff in Laverie was a professor who claimed an associate dean, who oversaw faculty recruiting, defamed him when he was passed over for a promotion. *Id.* at 750. The defendant moved for summary judgment on the basis that her statements were made in the scope of employment and she was therefore immune from suit in her individual capacity. *Id.* The trial court denied this motion and the court of appeals affirmed on the basis that the defendant “failed to offer evidence that she was not furthering her own purposes, rather than her employer’s, when she made the allegedly defamatory statements.” *Id.* The Supreme Court reversed, noting that nothing “in the statutory definition of ‘scope of employment’ suggests subjective intent is a necessary component of the scope-of-employment analysis.” *Id.* at 753. Instead, the scope-of-employment analysis “remains fundamentally objective: Is there a connection between the employee’s job duties and the alleged tortious conduct?” *Id.* The Supreme Court concluded that the objective evidence showed that the defendant was acting in the scope of her employment as a dean who performed faculty recruiting and hiring, and she was entitled to dismissal under the election-of-remedies provision. *Id.* at 756.

Further contrast to Hein can be found in Harris County v. Gibbons, 150 S.W.3d 877 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2004, no pet.), finding that an off duty deputy sheriff was in the course and scope of employment when he rear ended another vehicle in his patrol car. At the time of the accident, Deputy Robert Barber’s shift had ended and he was driving his patrol car to a second job. He pulled up to a stop light and was checking the license of a truck stopped near him to see if it was stolen. As he was looking down to check his on-board computer, his car rolled forward and hit Gibbon’s car. The County contended that it could not be held liable for Barber’s negligence because he was not in the scope of his employment at the time of the accident. The Fourteenth Court of Appeals rejected this argument based on the following factors: (1) as a certified peace officer, he had a legal obligation to investigate the matter if he believed a crime, the truck being stolen, had occurred; (2) he was performing a function of his job at the time of the accident; (3) he signed onto his radio at the time he was checking on the truck; and (4) he was entitled to compensatory pay for his work in checking on the truck and taking any other action related to what he found; and (5) after the accident they went to his patrol station and filled out necessary paper work. *Id.*

The holdings in Hein, Laverie, and Gibbons establish that the determination of whether the employee is on duty at the time of the events giving rise to the suit is not determined by whether they are “on the clock” or even whether they *intended* their actions to be in furtherance of their employment. Rather, the courts look to whether the employee’s actions were objectively

related to their job duties in deciding whether the employees was working at the time of the events in question and whether the governmental entity is liable for their negligence. See Hein v. Harris County, 557 S.W.2d 366 (Tex. Civ. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1977, writ refused n.r.e.); Gibbons, 150 S.W.3d at 877.

One exception may exist if the asserted job duty is inapplicable to the factual circumstances. In Garza v. Harrison, 531 S.W.3d 852 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2017, pet. filed), a police officer claimed he was acting in course and scope when he shot and killed the plaintiff, who was attempting to escape in a vehicle. *Id.* at 855. At the time, the officer was off-duty and working as a courtesy patrol officer near an apartment complex outside his jurisdiction. *Id.* The court held that while the officer had a lawful duty to preserve the peace “within the officer’s jurisdiction,” because he was outside of his jurisdiction at the time of the incident, he was not obligated to intervene. *Id.* at 859 (quoting Tex. Code Crim. Proc. art. 2.13(a)). The court concluded that the officer acted outside his duty, but cautioned that “determining whether the officer is immune is a context-specific inquiry that depends on the circumstances of the particular case and whether those circumstances dictate that the officer had a duty to act.” *Id.* at 861.

Recent cases have begun to address the amount and quality of evidence needed to support the course-and-scope finding as a matter of law, particularly in the context of motions to dismiss under section 101.106(f). In Fryday v. Michaelski, 541 S.W.3d 345 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2017, pet. denied), the court held that a defendant’s affidavit was sufficient to establish that he was an employee when plaintiff’s controverting evidence (which purportedly showed that defendant was a part-time subcontractor) was not filed properly with the court. *Id.* at 350–51. Similarly, in Perales v. Lara, No. 13-16-00285-CV, 2018 Tex. App. LEXIS 301, (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi Jan. 11, 2018, no pet.), when responding to accusations that they fraudulently prevented plaintiff’s employment, two school district employees based their plea to the jurisdiction on affidavits that generally stated that their job duties included communications about employment scenarios. *Id.* at \*5–6. The court held that these affidavits, in conjunction with the language of the Texas Education Code, were sufficient to support the employees’ dismissal under 101.106(f). *Id.* at \*14–15.

## B. Extent of Waiver of Sovereign Immunity Under the TCA.<sup>6</sup>

### 1. Section 101.021: How an Employee’s Immunity From Liability Affects the Plaintiff’s Ability to Bring Suit Under This Section.

While section 101.021 clearly waives immunity, the plaintiff’s ability to successfully pursue a claim under this section depends upon whether suit based on the tortious conduct of an employee and whether suit against that employee would be barred by official immunity. Section 101.021 is broken into two separate subsections. Subsection 1 provides that a governmental entity can be sued for property damages, personal injury, or death resulting from the operation or use of a motor-driven vehicle or motor-driven equipment. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.021(1). A person can bring suit arising from operation of a motor-driven vehicle or motor-driven equipment only if the employee operating that equipment would be personally liable to the claimant according to Texas law. *Id.* Thus, the Texas Supreme Court has held that if suit against the employee operating motor-driven equipment or motor-vehicle is barred by official immunity, then suit against his governmental employers is also barred. Tex. Dep’t. of Pub. Safety v. Bonilla, 481 S.W.3d 640 (Tex. 2015); DeWitt v. Harris County, 904 S.W.2d 650, 653 (Tex. 1995); K.D.F. v. Rex, 878 S.W.2d 589, 597 (Tex. 1994); City of Houston v. Kilburn, 849 S.W.2d 810, 812 (Tex. 1993).

Subsection 2 of section 101.021 allows suit for personal injury or death caused by the condition or use of tangible personal or real property. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.021(2). It does not permit strict liability claims. See EPGT Tex. Pipeline, L.P. v. Harris County Flood Control Dist., 176 S.W.3d 330 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2004, pet. dism’d). This section only allows suit, however, if the governmental unit would be liable under Texas law “were it a private person.” *Id.* The supreme court has held that the “were it a private person” language precludes suit against a governmental entity if the claim is predicated on a respondeat superior theory and suit against the governmental employee would be barred by official immunity. DeWitt, 904 S.W.2d at 653-54.

Consistent with subsection 1, we construed subsection 2 of section 101.021 to predicate the governmental unit’s respondeat superior liability upon the liability of its employee.

When, as in this case, the governmental unit’s liability under section 101.021(2) is based on respondeat superior for an employee’s negligence arising from the misuse of tangible personal property, the liability is derivative or indirect.

....

Here, official immunity, like any other affirmative defense the employee may have, becomes relevant to the governmental entity’s liability. ... [W]ere it a private person, the county would be entitled to assert any affirmative defenses its employee has to liability. ... In this case, the affirmative defense is official immunity. It would serve no legislative purpose to declare a waiver of sovereign immunity when the basis of liability is respondeat superior and the acts of the employee are covered by official immunity.

We hold that the county is not liable under section 101.021(2) for the negligence of its employee when the employee has no liability because of official immunity.

*Id.*; King, 2003 WL 22937252, at \*5. When suit is based upon section 101.021(1) or a respondeat superior theory under 101.021(a), the plaintiff bears the burden of establishing that suit against the individual employees, who’s actions caused the damages, is not entitled to official immunity. See *id.* at 654. Thus, a governmental entity can rely on the official immunity of its employee regardless of whether the employee is a party to the suit. City of Beverly Hills v. Guevara, 904 S.W.2d 655, 656 (Tex.1995). City of Beverly Hills v. Guevara, 904 S.W.2d 655, 656 (Tex.1995). Derivative immunity is an affirmative defense; it requires the governmental defendant to establish that its employee performed a discretionary act in good faith and within the scope of his or her authority. Wadewitz v. Montgomery, 951 S.W.2d 464, 466 (Tex.1997); City of Lancaster v. Chambers, 883 S.W.2d 650, 653 (Tex.1994). Wadewitz v. Montgomery, 951 S.W.2d 464, 465–466 (Tex.1997); City of Lancaster v. Chambers, 883 S.W.2d 650, 653 (Tex.1994).

To prevail on the affirmative defense of “derivative immunity,” the governmental entity must establish the “objective legal reasonableness” of the

<sup>6</sup> It must be kept in mind that the remedies authorized and created by the TCA are in addition to any other remedies or redress a party may have against a governmental entity. TCA § 101.003. See Kerrville HRH, Inc. v. City of Kerrville, 803 S.W.2d 377, 381 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 1990, pet. denied)

(plaintiff was not precluded from bringing Deceptive Trade Practices Act claims against the city by the TCA); Burgess v. City of Houston, 718 F.2d 151, 154-55 (5th Cir. 1983) (“the Act, however, preserves a claimant’s common law right to seek unlimited damages for negligence of a municipality while performing a proprietary function”).

officer/employee’s actions. *Bonilla*, 481 S.W.3d at 642-43. *Bonilla* brought suit for injuries she sustained when she was struck by a DPS Trooper who was pursuing a speeding vehicle. *Id.* The Supreme Court addressed the standard for proving the “derivative immunity defense” and applied that standard to the evidence offered by the DPS in support of its plea to the jurisdiction and motion for summary judgment.

Official immunity is an affirmative defense that protects a governmental employee from personal liability and, in doing so, preserves a governmental employer’s sovereign immunity from suit for vicarious liability. A governmental employee is entitled to official immunity for the good-faith performance of discretionary duties within the scope of the employee’s authority. The issue in this case is whether DPS’s summary-judgment evidence conclusively established the “good faith” element of the defense.

Good faith is a test of objective legal reasonableness. As we have consistently held, a law-enforcement officer can obtain summary judgment in a pursuit or emergency-response case by proving that a reasonably prudent officer, under the same or similar circumstances, could have believed the need for the officer’s actions outweighed a clear risk of harm to the public from those actions. “‘Need’ refers to the urgency of the circumstances requiring police intervention, while ‘risk’ refers to the countervailing public safety concerns.”

Good faith does not require proof that all reasonably prudent officers would have resolved the need/risk analysis in the same manner under similar circumstances.

Correspondingly, evidence of good faith is not controverted merely because a reasonably prudent officer could have made a different decision. Rather, when the summary-judgment record bears competent evidence of good faith, that element of the official-immunity defense is established unless the plaintiff shows that *no* reasonable person in the officer’s position could have thought the facts justified the officer’s actions.

...

Viewed properly, the good-faith standard is analogous to an abuse-of-discretion standard that protects “‘all but the plainly incompetent

or those who knowingly violate the law.’” It is “‘not equivalent to a general negligence test, which addresses what a reasonable person *would have done*”; thus, “[e]vidence of negligence alone will not controvert competent evidence of good faith.” Similarly, evidence that a reasonable law-enforcement officer could have resolved the need/risk analysis differently does not overcome competent evidence of good faith. The appropriate focus is what a reasonable officer *could have believed*, and the determinative inquiry is whether any reasonably prudent officer possessed of the same information could have determined the trooper’s actions were justified.

...

Evidence of an officer’s good faith must be substantiated with facts showing the officer assessed both the need to apprehend the suspect and the risk of harm to the public. Summary-judgment proof does not provide a “suitable basis” for determining good faith if it fails to address several factors we have identified as bearing on the need/risk analysis, including the availability of any alternative action. Good faith is not necessarily negated if the summary-judgment evidence reveals that the officer had a viable alternative, but the evidence must nevertheless show the officer assessed the availability of any alternative course of action.

To establish good faith in this case, DPS relied almost exclusively on the trooper’s account of the incident, as reflected in his affidavit, deposition testimony, and incident report. The trooper testified that he observed a vehicle speed past him, weaving in and out of traffic. Although the trooper had decided to stop the vehicle, he explained that he did not immediately do so because there was no improved shoulder and he believed the location was unsafe to make a traffic stop. Very shortly thereafter, however, the vehicle failed to yield at a red light. The trooper testified that he believed the driver posed a risk of harm to the public but, at that point, he did not have sufficient time to call in the license-plate number to identify the driver of the vehicle. The trooper therefore decided to pursue the vehicle through the intersection and, according to him, did so only after slowing at the intersection and activating his emergency overhead lights. He stated that he

did not have time to activate his emergency siren before he collided with Bonilla.

The court of appeals held that DPS’s summary-judgment evidence was not competent to prove good faith because it did not “establish[] that [the trooper] considered whether any alternative course of action was available to stop the speeding truck.” We disagree with the court’s characterization of the evidence.

Magic words are not required to establish that a law-enforcement officer considered the need/risk balancing factors. Summary judgment on official immunity requires that a movant establish facts upon which the court could base its legal conclusion, but no particular words are required. In University of Houston v. Clark, we concluded that an officer’s affidavit testimony adequately addressed alternatives to pursuit by stating:

“[T]he suspect [in a physical altercation on university property] had not been identified before he fled the foot patrol officers[, and] [t]he manner in which the suspect operated his vehicle and the high rate of speed at which he traveled ... posed a danger to the public.”

Another officer’s affidavit was likewise sufficient to address alternatives by averring:

“[I] followed the suspect at a distance and was not able to get close enough to the suspect vehicle to obtain its license plate number. I had expected the suspect vehicle to stop when the driver observed my overhead lights and siren behind him,” but he did not.

...[W]e conclude DPS’s evidence is not significantly different from the evidence in Clark that we found adequate to address the alternative-options element of the need/risk analysis. DPS’s summary-judgment evidence detailed the specific circumstances giving rise to pursuit and emphasized the potential danger to the public due to the subject vehicle’s erratic and unsafe activity. Although not explicitly addressing alternatives to pursuit, the trooper implicitly discounted the viability of other alternatives based on his stated belief that immediate action was necessary and his

inability to identify the driver at that time. The fact that the trooper did not expressly identify “alternatives” that may have been considered does not render the evidence deficient. The court of appeals erred in holding otherwise.

*Id.* at 642-645.

Keep in mind, that the official immunity determination will not be relevant to all claims brought under section 101.021(2). As the supreme court noted in DeWitt, certain cases under the TCA, such as premise liability cases, are not predicated upon a respondeat superior theory. *Id.* at 653. These are typically cases that arise from the condition of tangible personal or real property. See City of Corinth v. Gladys, 916 S.W.2d 618, 623 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 1996, no writ). In these cases, official immunity is not an available defense because suit is based upon the condition of the property, rather than how the property was used by an employee. See *id.*

## 2. Section 101.106: Election of Remedies.

Section 101.106 is intended to save the resources of governmental entities and their employees by forcing a plaintiff to choose whether she wants to sue the governmental entity involved OR its employees and agents in their individual capacities. Section 101.106 may preclude the plaintiff from later suing other defendants. Alexander, 435 S.W.3d at 791. However, where the plaintiff sues employees the trial court must look to the substance of the plaintiff’s claims, not the characterization in the pleading in deciding whether the suit is against the governmental entity rather than an employee or official in their individual capacities. *Id.*

Section 101.106 is entitled Election of Remedies and states:

- (a) The filing of a suit under this chapter against a governmental unit constitutes an irrevocable election by the plaintiff and immediately and forever bars any suit or recovery by the plaintiff against any individual employee of the governmental unit regarding the same subject matter.
- (b) The filing of a suit against any employee of a governmental unit constitutes an irrevocable election by the plaintiff and immediately and forever bars any suit or recovery by the plaintiff against the governmental unit regarding the same subject matter unless the governmental unit consents.
- (c) The settlement of a claim arising under this chapter shall immediately and forever bar the claimant from any suit against or recovery from any employee of the same governmental unit regarding the same subject matter.

- (d) A judgment against an employee of a governmental unit shall immediately and forever bar the party obtaining the judgment from any suit against or recovery from the governmental unit.
- (e) If a suit is filed under this chapter against both a governmental unit and any of its employees, the employees shall immediately be dismissed on the filing of a motion by the governmental unit.
- (f) If a suit is filed against an employee of a governmental unit based on conduct within the general scope of that employee’s employment and if it could have been brought under this chapter against the governmental unit, the suit is considered to be against the employee in the employee’s official capacity only. On the employee’s motion, the suit against the employee shall be dismissed unless the plaintiff files amended pleadings dismissing the employee and naming the governmental unit as defendant on or before the 30th day after the date the motion is filed.

#### TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT §101.106

The purpose of section 101.106 is, in part, to preclude suits against governmental employees and officials, where the claim is properly against the entity. Alexander, 435 S.W.3d at 791.

Application of the TTCA’s election-of-remedies provision requires a determination as to whether an employee acted independently and is thus solely liable, or acted within the general scope of his or her employment such that the governmental unit is vicariously liable. The Legislature mandates this determination in order to reduce the resources that the government and its employees must use in defending redundant litigation and alternative theories of recovery. To that end, the statute compels dismissal of government employees when suit should have been brought against the government.

...

[W]hen suit is brought against a government employee for conduct within the general scope of his employment, and suit could have been brought under the TTCA against the government, subsection 101.106(f) provides that the suit is considered to be against the employee in the employee’s official capacity only. We explained that such a suit is *not* a suit against the employee; it is, in all but name only, a suit against the governmental unit.”

This is because a suit against an employee in his official capacity actually seeks to impose liability against the governmental unit rather than on the individual specifically named. Accordingly, we held ... that a suit against a government employee in his official capacity pursuant to subsection (f) is essentially a suit against the employer and therefore does not trigger the bar to suit against the government under subsection (b). We [have] also indicated ... that subsection (f) provides the appropriate avenue for dismissal of an employee who is considered to have been sued in his official capacity. ... [Thus on] the employee’s motion, the suit against the employee shall be dismissed.

Alexander, 435 S.W.3d at 791 (internal quotations omitted); Tex. Dep’t of Aging and Disability Servs. v. Cannon, 453 S.W.3d 411, 415 (Tex. 2015) (“The current version of the provision serves the additional purpose of easing the burden placed on governmental units and their employees in defending duplicative claims, in part by ‘favor[ing] the expedient dismissal of ... employees when suit should have been brought against the government’ under the Act.”).

At the filing of suit the plaintiff must make an election to file suit against the entity or its employees. Molina v. Alvarado, 463 S.W.3d 867 (Tex. 2015); see also Univ. of Tex. Health Sci. Ctr. v. Rios, 542 S.W.3d 530, 538 (Tex. 2017).

#### a. 101.106 (a) and (b)

Sub-section (a) forces/requires a plaintiff to make an irrevocable selection of defendant; if she sues the governmental entity, then she cannot thereafter sue any employees in their individual capacities. As sub-section (a) clearly states, filing suit against the entity bars any effort to bring suit against the employee or employees involved in the incident that gives rise to the claims. TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 101.106 (a). Waxahachie Indep. School Dist. v. Johnson, 181 S.W.3d 781, 785 (Tex.App.–Waco 2005, pet. denied). Once the plaintiff files suit against the governmental entity she is forever barred from bringing claims against employees for tort claims arising from the same events or occurrences. Molina, 463 S.W.3d 867. The only exception to the bar created by sub-paragraph (a) are claims for which immunity is otherwise waived by federal or state statutes. *Id.*

We have held that tort claims against the government are (or could be) brought “under this chapter” regardless of whether the Tort Claims Act waives immunity for those claims. Franka v. Velasquez, 332 S.W.3d 367, 379–80 (Tex. 2011); Garcia, 253 S.W.3d at 659

(“Because the Tort Claims Act is the only, albeit limited, avenue for common-law recovery against the government, all tort theories alleged against a governmental unit, whether it is sued alone or together with its employees, are assumed to be ‘under [the Tort Claims Act]’ for purposes of section 101.106.”).section 101.106.”). However, claims asserted pursuant to independent statutory waivers of immunity are not brought “under” the Act.

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But that election did not extend to section 1983But that election did not extend to section 1983 claims against the individual Employees that were *not* brought under the Tort Claims Act and thus were *not* otherwise subject to dismissal. ...

\*\*\*                      \*\*\*                      \*\*\*

The role of subsections (e) and (f) is to ensure that tort claims within the purview of the Act do not proceed against a government employee for conduct within the scope of his employment. See Ngakoue, 408 S.W.3d at 355. See Ngakoue, 408 S.W.3d at 355. But those provisions simply do not apply to claims against the employee individually that are outside the Act’s scope.

Cannon, 453 S.W.3d at 415, 417–18.

The amended sub section (b) states that the filing of suit against an employee constitutes an “irrevocable election” barring any suit for recovery against the governmental entity regarding the same subject matter unless the governmental unit consents. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.106(b). Tex. Dep’t of Ag. v. Calderon, 221 S.W.3d 918 (Tex.App.–Corpus Christi, 2007) (disapproved of on other grounds in Franka v. Velasquez, 332 S.W.3d 367 (Tex. 2011)).

Sub-section (b) provides that suit against the employees bars subsequent suit against the entity, unless the entity “consents.” TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 101.106 (b). The Supreme Court has held that, if a statute waives immunity from suit, then the governmental entity is held to have consented to suit under sub-section (b). Texas Adjutant General’s Office v. Ngakoue, 408 S.W.3d 350, 356 (Tex. 2013); Mission Consol. Ind. School Dist., 372 S.W.3d at 655.

A trial court must look to the substance of plaintiff’s claims to determine whether sub-sections bar claims against the individuals or the entity. Alexander, 435 S.W.3d 789, 791–92. Where the plaintiff’s claim is based on actions taken in the course and scope of the

official or employee’s position with the entity, and the claim is a tort claim, then the claim is properly one against the entity, regardless of whether the live pleading states the defendants are sued in their individual capacities. *Id.* Thus, in Alexander where the claims were based on torts allegedly taken in the course and scope of officer’s work, the claim was against the County; and all claims against officers in their individual capacity were barred. *Id.*

In Molina, the Texas Supreme Court gave some sage advice to a plaintiff filing suit that is uncertain whether the individual employees acted in the course and scope of her employment.

“Because the decision regarding whom to sue has irrevocable consequences, a plaintiff must proceed cautiously before filing suit and carefully consider whether to seek relief from the governmental unit or from the employee individually.” *Id.* However, as we have previously noted, a plaintiff “may not be in the position of knowing whether the [employee] was acting within the scope of employment” when he files suit. TAGO, 408 S.W.3d at 359.

In today’s case, Alvarado filed suit and initially named only the governmental unit itself, not its employee. This action “constitute[d] an irrevocable election ... and immediately and forever bar[red] any suit or recovery by [Molina] against any individual employee of the governmental unit regarding the same subject matter.” TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODEE § 101.106(a).TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 101.106(a).

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If at the time Alvarado filed suit he possessed insufficient information to determine whether Molina was acting within the scope of his employment, the prudent choice would have been to sue Molina, and await a factual resolution of that question. See TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODEE § 101.106(f); Alexander, 435 S.W.3d at 791. Because Alvarado did not do so, he essentially chose his defendant before being required to do so by the election-of-remedies provision. That choice is still an irrevocable election under section 101.106, and the TTCA bars him from later filing suit against Molina.

Molina, 463 S.W.3d at 870.

Where the governmental entity or its employees move to substitute the entity as the proper defendant, 101.106(b) will not bar the plaintiff from pursuing



claims against the entity. Tex. Tech Univ. Health Sciences Ctr. v. Villagran, 369 S.W.3d 523 (Tex.App.—Amarillo 2012, pet. pending). In Villagran the plaintiff initially brought suit against doctors employed by the Texas Tech University Hospital. When one of the doctors moved to dismiss claims against him pursuant to section 101.106(f) of the Civil Practice and Remedies Code, the plaintiffs amended their pleading and dismissed their claims against that doctor, retained other doctors as parties but added Texas Tech University as a defendant. Tech then filed a motion to dismiss all of the remaining doctors. By separate motion, Tech filed a motion to dismiss all claims against it contending that because the plaintiffs’ had brought suit against the university’s employees, the claims against the university were barred by section 101.106(b) of the TCA. The Amarillo Court rejected Tech’s argument noting that subparagraph (f) of section 101.106 provides for the substitution of the governmental employer in place of an employee or official that has been sued. *Id.* The Court pointed out that Tech’s reasoning that a suit against employees bars claims against the entity would make section 101.106(f) meaningless. *Id.*

b. 101.106(c) and (d)

Subsections (c) and (d) bar subsequent litigation once a judgment is entered or the case is settled. Sub-section (c) provides that a settlement shall immediately and forever bar claims against employees of the governmental entity regarding the same subject matter. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.106(c). As with sub-sections (a) and (b), the prohibition applies to all claims that involve the same “subject matter,” and bar claims even if they are not brought under the TCA. Thus, a plaintiff needs to be careful in settling claims because this will bar further litigation arising from the “subject matter” of the claims that were settled.

Once a judgment against the employee is entered, sub-section (d) bars other claims from being brought against the governmental entity. “A judgment against an employee of a governmental unit shall immediately and forever bar the party obtaining a judgment from any suit against or recovery from the governmental unit.” Section 101.106(d). The bar under sub-section (d) applies even if the suit is dismissed for want of jurisdiction. A dismissal based on sovereign immunity is a final judgment that would bar claims under the act from being brought against governmental employees. Harris County v. Sykes, 136 S.W.3d 635 (Tex. 2004). The plaintiffs in Sykes initially brought suit against Harris County. *Id.* Harris County filed a plea to the jurisdiction asserting that there was no waiver of immunity from suit. *Id.* The plaintiffs then amended their petition and, in the amended petition, added Carl Borchers, a corrections officer in the Harris County jail, as a defendant, both individually and in his official capacity. *Id.* The trial court thereafter granted Harris

County’s plea to the jurisdiction, finding no waiver of immunity from suit. *Id.* After the County’s plea to the jurisdiction was granted, Borchers moved for summary judgment on the grounds that section 101.106 barred any suit against him because a final judgment had been entered on the plaintiffs’ claims against the County. *Id.* The Supreme Court held that the old version of section 101.106, before the 2003 amendments, “applies not only when there has been a judgment against a governmental entity prior to suit against the employee but also when the settlement or judgment against the governmental entity occurs at any time before or during the pendency of the action against the employee. ... The bar applies regardless of whether the judgment is favorable or adverse to the governmental entity.” *Id.* at 640. Earlier in the opinion the Texas Supreme Court had held that when a plaintiff has had a reasonable opportunity to amend its pleadings after a governmental entity filed the plea to the jurisdiction and the plaintiff’s amended pleading does not allege facts establishing a waiver of immunity, the trial court should dismiss the suit. *Id.* See Texas Dep’t of Crim. Justice v. Campos, 384 S.W.3d 810, 815-16 (where plaintiffs have amended their pleadings three times over 9 years after the first plea to the jurisdiction was filed, then they have had adequate opportunity to emend their pleadings to assert claims for which immunity has been waived and the case should be dismissed). “Such a dismissal is with prejudice because a plaintiff should not be permitted to relitigate jurisdiction once that issue has been fully determined.” Sykes, 136 S.W.3d at 639. Based on the fact that any dismissal of the suit against the County would be with prejudice, the court held that section 101.106 barred the suit against Major Borchers. *Id.*; see Fiske v. Heller, No. 03-03-00387-CV, 2004 WL 1404100 (Tex.App.—Austin 2004, no pet.) (mem. op.).

Courts of appeals have held that section 101.106 barred claims arising from the same actions or circumstances and that the section applies regardless of whether the original action was filed in federal or state court. In Aguilar v. Ramirez, 2004 WL 1353723 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 2004, pet. denied) (mem. op.), the plaintiffs originally filed suit in federal court, bringing claims against Aguilar’s employer, the Department of Public Safety and the State of Texas. The federal court dismissed all of plaintiffs’ claims, including their claims under the Texas Tort Claims Act. The dismissal of the claims under the Tort Claims Act was based on the absence of a waiver of immunity. Aguilar relied upon the dismissal in federal court to support his motion for summary judgment under section 101.106. The Corpus Christi court held that the dismissal of the federal court action was a judgment sufficient to trigger the bar created by section 101.106. The court specifically found that the federal court’s finding that sovereign immunity was not waived by the Tort Claims Act was a judgment for purposes of

application of section 101.106. Furthermore, the court rejected the plaintiffs’ arguments that they were bringing negligence claims against Aguilar whereas they had brought constitutional and intentional tort claims in their federal causes of action. “Whether the plaintiff’s claim against the governmental unit falls under the Tort Claims Act is relevant; whether the plaintiff’s claim against the employee falls under the Tort Claims Act is not. ... [T]he legislature used the broad term ‘same subject matter.’ ... The term ‘same subject matter’ in section 101.106 means ‘arising out of the same actions, transactions, or occurrences.’ See Coronado v. Milam, 2004 WL 1195879 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 2004, pet. denied) (section 101.106 barred suit against individual officers based upon dismissal of federal action against the City of San Antonio where federal and state suit involved the same subject matter); McGown v. Huang, 120 S.W.3d 452 (Tex.App.—Texarkana 2003, pet. denied). In McGown, the Texarkana court noted that the terms of section 101.106 are read very broadly to convey immunity to all employees involved whose conduct gives rise to the claim, regardless of whether their conduct formed the basis of the judgment in the action against the governmental entity. In McGown, the plaintiffs’ suit against the hospital district was dismissed because the two actors of whose conduct the plaintiffs complained were not employees of the hospital district. The fact that the plaintiff had brought claims against the hospital district however, barred a subsequent action against a nurse employed by the district. The court explained that section 101.106 applies when the second action involves the same subject matter regardless of whether it is based on the same causes of action. The court also explained that while the application of section 101.106 may be harsh, when a party chooses to bring an action pursuant to the Tort Claims Act, “she is bound by its provisions and limitations, including section 101.106.” *Id.* at 459.

The Sykes and Aguilar cases were in line with cases that had interpreted section 101.106 broadly to restrict plaintiffs’ rights under the Act. See, e.g., Gonzalez v. El Paso Hosp. Dist., 940 S.W.2d 793, 795 (Tex.App.—El Paso 1997, no writ)(judgment need not be against the governmental until before the procedural bar applies), and Putthoff v. Anchrum, 934 S.W.2d 164, 174 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 1996, writ denied) (section 101.106 bars suit when the judgment is based on plaintiff’s failure to comply with the Act’s notice requirements).

c. 101.106(e)

A plaintiff cannot avoid the irrevocable election of defendant created by sub-sections (a) and (b) by naming both the entity and employees as defendants. If a plaintiff brings suit against both a governmental unit and its employee, the employee “shall immediately be

dismissed on the filing of a motion by the governmental unit.” Section 101.106(e).

While sub-paragraph (e) says the dismissal is “immediate,” the dismissal is not effective until the court enters an order granting the dismissal. Cannon, 453 S.W.3d at 416. The reference to “immediate” in paragraph (e) does not mean claims are immediately dismissed, the dismissal is only effective upon the entry of an order and the filing of motion does preclude amending pleading before entry of an order of dismissal. *Id.* Thus while plaintiff could amend her pleadings prior to entry of the order of dismissal, *Id.*, and while the plaintiff can choose to dismiss or non-suit claims, the dismissal cannot disadvantage another party. plaintiff. Plaintiff cannot use the filing of a non-suit as a means of prejudicing another party.

However, the *right* to dismissal arises upon filing of the motion to dismiss under Rule 101.106(e). Univ. of Tex. Health Sci. Ctr. v. Rios, 542 S.W.3d 530, 538 (Tex. 2017). The procedural implications of this timing mean that a plaintiff may not amend his suit after the 101.106(e) motion is filed to nonsuit claims against an employee and thereby avoid the election. *Id.* at 533–38. In Rios, plaintiff also argued that the defendants’ amendment of their motion to dismiss precluded the effect of their original motion and allowed his amendment of his petition to take effect. *Id.* at 538. The Texas Supreme Court rejected this argument as well, noting that the right to dismissal was triggered when the defendants filed their motion. *Id.*

Similarly, in Austin State Hospital v. Graham, 347 S.W.3d 298 (Tex. 2011), the plaintiff brought health care liability claims against a state hospital and two employee physicians. *Id.* at 299. The hospital filed a motion to dismiss the physicians under subsection (e), but, before the trial court entered a dismissal order, the plaintiff nonsuited his claims against the hospital. *Id.* The plaintiff argued that his nonsuit precluded the trial court from ruling on the hospital’s subsection (e) motion. *Id.* The Supreme Court rejected that argument, holding that the hospital was entitled to a ruling on its subsection (e) motion notwithstanding plaintiff filing a notice of nonsuit. *Id.*

d. 101.106(f)

Finally, sub-section (f) provides that, if a suit is filed against an employee based on conduct within the general scope of the employee’s employment that plaintiff could had brought under the Tort Claims Act against the governmental unit itself, the suit is considered an action brought against the employee in his official capacity. Moreover, the suit against the employee will be dismissed unless the plaintiff amends her pleadings dismissing the employee and naming the government unit as a defendant within 30 days after a motion is filed. TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 101.106 (f).

Suits against an employee arising from actions within the scope of the employee’s employment is, in effect, a suit against the governmental entity. Univ. of Tex. Health Sci. Ctr. v. Bailey, 332 S.W.3d 395, 400-01 (Tex. 2011). “The TTCA defines the term ‘scope of employment’ as ‘the performance for a governmental unit of the duties of an employee’s office or employment and includes being in or about the performance of a task lawfully assigned to an employee by competent authority.’ Franka, 332 S.W.3d at 382–83. § 101.001(5). The Restatement (Third) of Agency provides additional clarity by defining the term negatively: “[a]n employee’s act is not within the scope of employment when it occurs within an independent course of conduct not intended by the employee to serve any purpose of the employer.” RESTATEMENT (THIRD) OF AGENCY § 7.07(2) (2006), cited by Franka, 332 S.W.3d at 381 n. 63.” Alexander, 435 S.W.3d at 790, (“Application of the TTCA’s election-of-remedies provision requires a determination as to whether an employee acted independently and is thus solely liable, or acted within the general scope of his or her employment such that the governmental unit is vicariously liable.”).”).

Consequently, when a suit against an employee is “based on conduct within the general scope of that employee’s employment,” the suit constitutes an action in the employee’s official capacity and is, thus, a suit against the entity. *Id.* Therefore, even if the plaintiff later substitutes the entity in as the defendant, the statute of limitations is considered as tolled when the suit against the employee was filed. *Id.* Courts have further held that the government defendant’s filing of a 101.106(f) motion constitutes its judicial admission that the employee was acting in the course and scope of his employment. See Ramos v. City of Laredo, No. 04-17-00099-CV, 2018 Tex. App. LEXIS 2204 (Tex. App.—San Antonio Mar. 28, 2018, no pet.) (jury question on course and scope was improper and harmful when city had judicially admitted course and scope in motion).

In Bailey, the plaintiff sued a physician who is a professor employed by a state university medical school. *Id.* at 397. After the statute of limitations on medical malpractice suits had run, Bailey moved the trial court to order the Baileys to substitute his employer as the defendant. *Id.* The Baileys brought the entity in to the suit as the defendant and non-suited the claims against the physician. *Id.* at 398. The medical school answered the suit and both plaintiff and the medical school moved for summary judgment regarding whether the claims were barred by the statute of limitations. *Id.* at 399. The Texas Supreme Court held that, because the plaintiff had sued the physician for actions within the scope of his employment, the physician was sued in his official capacity and, thus, the suit was, from inception, a suit against the medical school. *Id.* at 401. See Franka, 332 S.W.3d at 381. Thus, the substitution of the

governmental entity as a party after the statute of limitations had run did not make the claims time barred because the governmental entity had been a party to the suit (regardless of whether they were joined as a defendant in their own name or sued in the name of their employee in his official capacity). Bailey, 332 S.W.3d at 401. But see Phelan v. Norville, 2014 WL 4808507, p.4-5-6 (Tex.App.—Amarillo Sept. 22, 2014, no pet.) (engineering professor that slapped another engineering professor and then slandered him in a personal email acted outside the scope of his employment.)

Similarly, in Laverie v. Wetherbe, the Texas Supreme Court addressed the standard for determining whether allegedly defamatory statement made by an associate dean toward a professor seeking a deanship were made within the course-and-scope of her employment. 517 S.W.3d 748 (Tex. 2017). The plaintiff argued that the court must consider the employee’s state of mind in determining whether she was acting within the course and scope of her employment. *Id.* The Court rejected this interpretation, restating: “The scope-of-employment analysis, therefore, remains fundamentally objective: Is there a connection between the employee’s job duties and the alleged tortious conduct? The answer may be yes even if the employee performs negligently or is motivated by ulterior motives or personal animus so long as the conduct itself was pursuant to her job responsibilities.” *Id.* at 752–53. See Garza v. Harrison, No. 17-0724, 62 Tex. Sup. Ct. J. 1149, 2019 Tex. LEXIS 497 (May 24, 2019)(Supreme Court held that a police officer attempting to arrest a suspect for a crime committed in plain view, whether off or on-duty and whether operating within their primary or extraterritorial jurisdiction, are acting within the general duties of their office, as statutorily conferred by and through their employment with a governmental unit.).

Like other provisions of 101.106, sub-section (f) applies to tort claims beyond those permitted by the TCA. See Franka, 332 S.W.3d at 381. Sub-section (f) provides that an employee who has been sued based on actions within the course and scope of her employment can move to dismiss the claims against her. *Id.* However, sub-section (f) references suits against the employee, “if [the suit] could have been brought under this chapter against the governmental entity....” TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM.CODE § 101.106(f). Courts of Appeal have held that the employee could not get dismissed under sub-section f unless the employee proved that the plaintiff could bring suit against the governmental entity under the TCA. *Id.* at 371. Thus, the employee could not get dismissed unless she could prove that the immunity had been waived and her employer could be held liable under the TCA. *Id.*

In Franka, the Supreme Court held that an employee is entitled to dismissal under 101.106(f) if the suit is a tort claim regardless of whether or not the

plaintiff can bring suit against the defendant’s employer. *Id.* at 380-82. Thus, the employee can get dismissed under sub-section (f) if the claim sounds in tort whether or not sovereign immunity has been waived allowing suit to be brought against the defendant’s employer. *Id.*

If a defendant moves to have the governmental entity substituted in as a party under sub-section (f), then the plaintiff has the choice to either agree to dismissal of the individual by joining the governmental entity as a party, or to fight the motion based on the argument that the individual was acting outside of the scope of his employment. Molina, 463 S.W.3d 867, 871; Mission Consol. Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Garcia, 253 S.W.3d 653, 657 (Tex. 2008).

Regardless, if a plaintiff joins the governmental entity after a motion to dismiss has been filed pursuant to sub-section (f), then whether or not he dismisses the individuals, his suit should not be dismissed. *Id.* \*8. In Texas Adjutant General’s Office v. Ngakoue, after the individual moved to dismiss the suit pursuant to sub-section (f), the plaintiff amended his petition to name the governmental entity as a defendant, but failed to state or move for dismissal. *Id.* at \*1. The Supreme Court held that, under these facts, the trial court should have dismissed the claims against the individual defendant, but should not have dismissed the plaintiff’s suit as long as there was a statute that waived the governmental entity’s immunity from suit. *Id.* at \*8.

The Supreme Court has also held that a non-suit cannot be used as a means of preventing the trial court from ruling on the issue of immunity from suit. The Supreme Court noted that the doctors had filed their own motion to dismiss and were entitled to immediate dismissal. Austin State Hosp. v. Graham, 347 S.W.3d 301 (Tex. 2011). “A nonsuit cannot prejudice the rights of an adverse party to be heard on a pending claim for affirmative relief. *Id.*”

### 3. Section 101.021: Liability for Operation or Use of Motor-Driven Vehicle or Motor-Driven Equipment.

A governmental entity is liable for the property damage, personal injury and wrongful death resulting from the negligent operation or use of a motor-driven vehicle or motor-driven equipment. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.021(1). The Act does not define what constitutes a motor vehicle or motorized equipment.

<sup>7</sup> The Act specifically excludes from motor-driven equipment, items used in the operation of flood gates or water release equipment by river authorities created under the laws of this state or medical equipment located in hospitals. TCA § 101.001(3). See Bennett v. Tarrant County Water Control and Improvement Dist. No. 1, 894 S.W.2d at 452.

<sup>8</sup> School districts and junior college districts can only be held

*Id.*<sup>7</sup> In determining whether something constitutes a motor vehicle, courts look at how that term is defined in other statutes. Ozolins v. Northlake Cmty. Coll., 805 S.W.2d 614 (Tex.App.–Fort Worth 1991, no writ); Estate of Garza v. McAllen Indep. Sch. Dist., 613 S.W.2d 526, 527, n.1-2 (Tex.App.–Beaumont 1981, writ ref’d n.r.e.). Other statutes define motor vehicles as: (1) vehicles of every type in which persons can be transported or drawn upon that are self propelled, but excluding vehicles moved by human power or used exclusively on stationary rails or tracks; (2) land vehicles such as motorcycles, truck-tractors, farm-tractors, passenger cars, and buses; and (3) objects having two or more wheels. *Id.*; Ozolins, 805 S.W.2d at 615. Following these definitions, the Fort Worth Court of Appeals found that a sailboat did not constitute a motor-driven vehicle under the terms of the TCA. *Id.*<sup>8</sup>

The supreme court has also established a test for determining when the plaintiff’s injuries arise from the “operation and use” of a motor vehicle. In Ryder v. Fayette County, the Texas Supreme Court set out what a plaintiff must prove to establish a claim related to the operation of a motor vehicle. 453 S.W.3d 922, 928 (Tex. 2015).

To begin with, a government employee must have been actively operating the vehicle at the time of the incident. See *id.* at 52 (finding no waiver where no government employee was present when student sustained injury in school bus). Moreover, the vehicle must have been used as a vehicle, and not, e.g., as a waiting area or holding cell. See, respectively, *id.* (explaining that unsupervised students were not using parked bus as a vehicle when they chose to meet there to talk); City of Kemah v. Vela, 149 S.W.3d 199 (Tex.App.–Houston [14th Dist.] 2004, pet. denied) City of Kemah v. Vela, 149 S.W.3d 199 (Tex.App.–Houston [14th Dist.] 2004, pet. denied) (finding no use where plaintiff was injured while sitting in parked police cruiser).

In addition, the tortious act alleged must relate to the defendant’s operation of the vehicle rather than to some other aspect of the defendant’s conduct. In other words, even where the plaintiff has alleged a tort on the part of

liable for the negligent operation of a motor vehicle. Ozolins, 805 S.W.2d at 815; TCA § 101.051. Unlike other governmental units covered by the Act, school districts and junior college districts cannot be held liable under the TCA for the use and operation of personal and real property or for premises defects. See Gravely v. Lewisville Indep. Sch. Dist., 701 S.W.2d 956 (Tex.App.–Fort Worth 1986, writ ref’d n.r.e.) (school district was not liable for injuries sustained by spectator when bleachers at a school athletic event collapsed).

a government driver, there is no immunity waiver absent the negligent or otherwise improper use of a motor-driven vehicle. For example, a driver’s failure to supervise children at a bus stop may rise to the level of negligence, but that shortcoming cannot accurately be characterized as negligent operation of the bus. Mount Pleasant Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Estate of Lindburg, 766 S.W.2d 208 (Tex.1989). Similarly, a police officer may commit assault in his cruiser, and that assault may constitute a tort, but it is not tortious use of a vehicle. See generally Hernandez v. City of Lubbock, 253 S.W.3d 750 (Tex.App.—Amarillo 2007, no pet.). Where the vehicle itself “is only the setting” for the defendant’s wrongful conduct, any resulting harm will not give rise to a claim for which immunity is waived under section 101.021. LeLeaux, 835 S.W.2d at 52; see also Davis v. City of Lubbock, No. 07-16-00080-CV, 2018 Tex. App. LEXIS 1034 (Tex. App.—Amarillo Feb. 6, 2018, no pet.) (use of hay baler to bale contaminated hay was not use of motor vehicle giving rise to claim).

Ryder, 453 S.W.3d at 927–28; See LeLeaux, 835 S.W. 2d at 51 (“‘operation’ refers to a doing or performing of a practical work and ‘use’ means to put or bring into action or service; to employ for or apply to a given purpose.”); Tejano Center for Community Concerns, Inc., v. Olvera, 2014 WL 4402210 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi Aug. 29, 2014, no pet.) (injury was from operation from motor vehicle where driver told student to take attendance while the bus was moving and then slammed on the brakes causing the girl to slip on wet floor and break her arm).

In order for the injuries to “arise from” the operation of the motor vehicle, there must be “a nexus between the injury negligently caused by a governmental employee and the operation or use of a motor-driven vehicle....” LeLeaux, 835 S.W.2d at 51; See also Dallas Area Rapid Transit v. Whitley, 104 S.W.3d 540, 543 (Tex. 2003).

The statute itself does not define “arises from.” We have defined this standard as a “nexus between the operation or use of the motor-driven vehicle or equipment and a plaintiff’s injuries.” We have also described the threshold as something more than actual cause but less than proximate cause. See Utica Nat’l Ins. Co. of Tex. v. Am. Indem. Co., 141 S.W.3d 198, 203 (Tex.2004) (“ ‘[A]rise out of’ means ... there is but[-]for causation, though not necessarily direct or proximate causation.”). Accordingly, a plaintiff can satisfy the “arising from” standard by demonstrating proximate cause. This is particularly appropriate in the context of the TTCA, which only reaches injuries “proximately caused by the wrongful act or omission or the negligence of an employee.”

TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODEE § 101.021(1). TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODEE § 101.021(1).

The components of proximate cause are cause in fact and foreseeability. W. Invs., Inc. v. Urena, 162 S.W.3d 547, 551 (Tex. 2005). Because proximate cause is ultimately a question for a fact-finder, we need only determine whether the petition “creates a fact question” regarding the causal relationship between Thumann’s conduct and the alleged injuries. Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 228; see also Ark. Fuel Oil Co. v. State, 154 Tex. 573, 280 S.W.2d 723, 729 (1955) (“Question[s] of causation such as proximate cause are normally treated as questions of fact unless reasonable minds cannot differ.”).

Ryder, 453 S.W.3d 922, 928–29; See Whitley, 104 S.W.3d at 540; Hopkins v. Spring Indep. Sch. Dist., 736 S.W.2d 617, 619 (Tex. 1987); Morales v. Barnett, 219 S.W.3d 477 (Tex.App.—Austin, 2007, no pet.) (no nexus between death of track athlete’s death and use of car or blinkers on car); Estate of Garza, 613 S.W.2d at 528 (plaintiff’s damages were caused by a knife and not the use of a motor vehicle); Jackson v. City of Corpus Christi, 484 S.W.2d 806, 809 (Tex. Civ. App.—Corpus Christi 1972, writ ref’d n.r.e.). Accordingly, injuries have been found to arise out of the negligent operation and use of a vehicle when:

- (a) Death caused when police officer drove his vehicle so that his high beam spot light and headlamps into oncoming traffic causing truck to run into a vehicle parks on the side of the road.
- (b) The plaintiff was run over by a prisoner driving a stolen sheriff’s department car that a deputy left running outside the jail. Finnigan v. Blanco County, 670 S.W.2d 313 (Tex.App.—Austin 1984, no writ);
- (c) The plaintiffs alleged a bus driver’s failure to activate warning flashers resulted in their daughter being struck by another car upon exiting the school bus, Hitchcock v. Garvin, 738 S.W.2d 34, 36-38 (Tex.App.—Dallas 1987, no writ) (holding that summary judgment evidence presented a fact question on whether the plaintiffs’ injuries arose out of the operation and use of the school bus);
- (d) The bus driver honked the bus horn to signal the plaintiff that it was safe to cross the street. Austin Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Gutierrez, 54 S.W.3d 860 (Tex.App.—Austin 2001, pet. denied). School district held liable because bus driver took affirmative action in honking

the horn which contributed to cause plaintiff’s injuries. *Id.* at 866.

- (e) The plaintiff was struck by a police car, driven by an on-duty officer, Guzman v. City of San Antonio, 766 S.W.2d 858, 860-61 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 1989, no writ);
- (f) The plaintiff was run down in the road after being dropped off in the wrong place by the school bus, Contreras v. Lufkin Indep. Sch. Dist., 810 S.W.2d 23, 26 (Tex.App.—Beaumont 1991, writ denied); *but see* Goston v. Hutchison, 853 S.W.2d 729, 734 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1993, no writ) (questioning Contreras holding);
- (g) Employee attached a rope to pickup truck and concrete picnic table to move table, and student became entangled in rope and was dragged. Vidor Ind. School Dist. v. Bentsen, 2005 WL 1653873 (Tex.App.—Beaumont 2005 no pet.)(mem. op.).
- (h). Damage to a helicopter caused by being hit by a bus as a result of failing to set the emergency brake on the bus was operation and use of a motor vehicle. PHI, Inc. v. Tex. Juvenile Justice Dep’t, 593 S.W.3d 296 (Tex. 2019).

Conversely, injuries do not arise from the operation and use of a motor vehicle when the:

- (a) Plaintiff was made to exit bus because of dispute with another passenger. The plaintiff was assaulted by other passenger after exiting the bus. Whitley, at 3.
- (b) Plaintiff was injured in a classroom and was merely transported by bus when she left school, Hopkins, 736 S.W.2d at 619;
- (c) Plaintiff struck her head on emergency door exit while playing in school bus that was parked and not in use, LeLeaux, 835 S.W.2d at 51-52;
- (d) Plaintiff’s injuries resulted from a student using a cigarette lighter to set off a smoke detector in a school district vehicle, Pierson v. Houston Indep. Sch. Dist., 698 S.W.2d 377, 380 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1985, writ ref’d n.r.e.);
- (e) Student was stabbed while riding on a school bus, Estate of Garza, 613 S.W.2d at 527-28;
- (f) Injuries allegedly resulted from the failure to transport patient in emergency ambulance, Brantley v. City of Dallas, 545 S.W.2d 284, 287 (Tex. Civ. App.—Amarillo 1976, writ ref’d n.r.e.);
- (g) Injuries resulted from a police officer’s failure to remove a stalled vehicle or direct traffic

around the stalled vehicle, Jackson, 484 S.W.2d at 809-10;

- (h) Plaintiff students were injured in an automobile accident after being dropped off at an unauthorized bus stop and getting a ride with a friend, Goston, 853 S.W.2d at 733-34;
- (i) Students were injured by the reckless driving of another student in a school parking lot, Heyer v. N. E. Indep. Sch. Dist., 730 S.W.2d 130, 131-32 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 1987, writ ref’d n.r.e.);
- (j) Plaintiff was injured while working on a carburetor in an auto mechanics class, Naranjo v. Southwest Indep. Sch. Dist., 777 S.W.2d 190, 192-93 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1989, writ denied);
- (k) Plaintiff school children were injured as a result of allegedly negligent planning and layout of school bus stop locations, Luna v. Harlingen Consol. Indep. Sch. Dist., 821 S.W.2d 442 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1991, pet. denied); and
- (l) Plaintiff was injured as a result of failure to provide a stop arm on a school bus, Cortez v. Weatherford Indep. Sch. Dist., 925 S.W.2d 144 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 1996, no writ).
- (m) “Use” of equipment to perform road and ditch grade work was done two years before flooding. *See* Ector County v. Breedlove, 168 S.W.3d 864 (Tex.App.—Eastland 2004, no pet.).
- (n) Arrestee was injured when a car hit the patrol car he was placed in. *See* City of Kemah v. Vela, 149 S.W.3d 199 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2004, pet. denied).
- (o) Student injured when he got off school bus and fell into ditch, where student left bus to help women injured in auto accident with bus. Arlington Ind. School Dist. v. Kellam, 2006 WL 240276 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 2006, no pet.).
- (p) Student injured from operation where driver told student to take attendance while the bus was moving and then slammed on the brakes causing the girl to slip on wet floor and break her arm). Olvera, 2014 WL 4402210.
- (q) Inmate was injured while van was (allegedly negligently) parked on highway shoulder but driver was not in vehicle. Tex. Dep’t of Criminal Justice v. Mendoza, No. 14-17-00117-CV, 2017 Tex. App. LEXIS 9015 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] Sep. 26, 2017, no pet.).

Therefore, the mere involvement of or proximity of a motor vehicle to an accident will not give rise to liability. LeLeaux, 835 S.W.2d at 52; *see* State v.

McAllister, 2004 WL 2434347 (Tex.App.—Amarillo 2004, pet. denied) (no liability where state employee picking up roadside trash hit by truck driven by third-party). Liability exists only when the injuries were actually caused by the operation or use of a motor vehicle under the control of the governmental unit named as a defendant. *Id.* at 51. In cases involving school buses, “when the allegations of negligence are related to the direction, control, and supervision of the students, the suit is barred; when the allegations of negligence are related to the negligent use of the motor vehicle itself, the suit is not barred.” Goston, 853 S.W.2d at 733 (citing Estate of Garza, 613 S.W.2d at 528). See also City of El Campo v. Rubio, 980 S.W.2d 943, 945-46 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1998, pet. dismissed w.o.j.) (affirming denial of City’s plea in abatement where injuries were alleged to have resulted from a police officer’s instructing a non-licensed passenger to drive vehicle to police station).

Furthermore, liability will not attach unless the motor vehicle is owned or controlled by the defendant governmental unit. Heyer, 730 S.W.2d at 131-32. The plaintiff in Heyer was struck by a car driven by another student and not owned by the school district. *Id.* The court held that because the school district did not own or control the car, the plaintiff could not bring suit under the TCA. *Id.*

At the same time, governmental entities can be liable for injuries caused by vehicles that they do not own if they control the vehicle. As explained by the Texas Supreme Court in LeLeaux, within the meaning of the TCA, “operation” of a motor vehicle means “doing or performing a practical work” and “use” of a motor vehicle means to put or bring into action or service, to employ for or apply to a given purpose.” LeLeux, 835 S.W.2d at 51. See Robinson v. Univ. of Tex. Med. Branch, 171 S.W.3d 365, 369 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2005, no pet.).

Based on this rationale, Galveston County was liable for injuries to a governmental employee injured when he fell from the raised bed of a dump truck that was not owned or driven by the governmental entity where county employees supervised the driver and provided spotters who signaled the driver when to move forward and when to stop. County of Galveston v. Morgan, 882 S.W.2d 485, 490 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1994, writ denied).

The spotters were county employees. They were a necessary part of the job. The spotters told the truck driver when to move forward, how far to move, when to raise his bed, how far to raise it, when to lower his bed, and when to stop. The movement of the truck and the laying of the [roadway material] was within the spotters’ sole discretion. If a driver moved his truck contrary to the spotters’ direction he could be fired. Although the spotters were not the drivers of the trucks, the spotters

“used or operated” the trucks by exercising complete control over their “use or operations” [and thus the County could be liable for their negligence]. *Id.*

One question that has recently arisen is whether an independent intentional tort by a third-party, while the government employee was still in control, could avoid the waiver of immunity for use of a motor vehicle. In City of Hous. v. Nicolai, 539 S.W.3d 378, 388 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2017, pet. filed), the court rejected the City’s defense that a drunk driver who ran a red light was an independent intentional tort that would prevent a waiver of immunity. *Id.* at 392. Instead, the court held that the negligence claims arose out of the officer’s failure to employ a seatbelt for the passenger, and that said failure was use of a motor vehicle sufficient to provide for a waiver under the act. *Id.* at 391-92.

The standard of care and liability to which a governmental entity is held depends upon whether it is acting as a common carrier. A governmental entity acts as a common carrier when it is in the primary business of “transporting passengers and goods.” Via Metro. Transit v. Meck, No. 18-0458, 63 Tex. Sup. Ct. J. 1495, 2020 Tex. LEXIS 613 at \*10 (June 26, 2020). If the governmental unit is a common carrier, it is held to a higher standard of care. *Id.*; Bryant v. Metro. Transit Auth., 722 S.W.2d 738, 739 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1986, no writ). For example, a common carrier is obligated to prevent passengers from being assaulted on its vehicles and to offer care and assistance to any passenger that is attacked. *Id.* Compare Estate of Garza, 613 S.W.2d at 527-28 (school not required to prevent assaults on bus).

A governmental entity, however, does not act as a common carrier in operating school buses or utilizing motor vehicles to carry out governmental functions. Estate of Lindburg, 766 S.W.2d at 212-13; Guzman, 766 S.W.2d at 860 (operation of police vehicle). In these circumstances, governmental entities are held only to a negligence standard of care, i.e. the actions of a reasonable person under this same or similar circumstance. Estate of Lindburg, 766 S.W.2d at 212-13. Thus, unless the defendant is acting as a common carrier, it is held to a negligence standard. *Id.*

Finally, keep in mind that the recovery of property damages is limited only to claims arising out of the use of motorized equipment or motor vehicles. Unless the plaintiff’s damages were caused by the negligent operation or use of a motor-driven equipment vehicle, he is precluded from recovering property damage. State Dep’t of Highways and Pub. Transp. v. Pruitt, 770 S.W.2d 638 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1989, no writ). Thus, while a plaintiff may be able to maintain an action under the TCA, outside of the provisions regarding liability for the operation or use of a motor vehicle, he will not recover a judgment for any property damage he has sustained. See *id.*

4. Section 101.021(2): Liability for the Condition or Use of Tangible Personal Property.

Section 101.021(2) establishes liability for personal injury and death caused by the condition or use of tangible personal property if a private person would be liable according to Texas law.<sup>9</sup> Whether the claim arises from the condition or use of property versus a premises defect is a question of law. Sampson v. Univ. of Texas, 500 S.W.3d 380, 385 (Tex. 2016). A claim is either for the condition or use of personal property or a premises defect but not both. *Id.* “The Tort Claims Act’s scheme of a limited waiver of immunity from suit does not allow plaintiffs to circumvent the heightened standards of a premises defect claim contained in section 101.022 by re-casting the same acts as a claim relating to the negligent condition or use of tangible property.” Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 233.

Condition or use comprise separate prongs of the Texas Tort Claims Act. See Dallas Metrocare Servs. v. Juarez, 420 S.W.3d 39, 42 (Tex.2013) (per curiam). The distinction between these two concepts is supported “by use of the disjunctive conjunction ‘or’ between the two [words], which signifies a separation between two distinct ideas.” Spradlin v. Jim Walter Homes, Inc., 34 S.W.3d 578, 581 (Tex. 2000).

The Legislature’s enunciation of the two concepts of ‘condition or use’ is consistent with the Court’s common law jurisprudence....

“[I]n a Texas Tort Claims Act ... we interpreted ... ‘condition or use’ to ‘encompass disparate bases for liability, one of which is not dependant [sic] upon the actions of any employee.’ DeWitt v. Harris Cnty., 904 S.W.2d 650, 653 (Tex.1995). We explained that the ‘use’ language ‘encompasses ... liability based on respondeat superior.’ *Id.* We explained that the ‘use’ language ‘encompasses ... liability based on respondeat superior.’ We added that the inclusion of ‘liability for a condition of real property’ existed ‘in addition to liability based on principles of respondeat superior,’ and therefore liability for a condition imposed liability for premises defects. *Id.* (emphasis omitted). Quite plainly, in DeWitt we held that the inclusion of the ‘use’ language was meant

to impose liability for the negligent actions of an employee based on principles of respondeat superior. *Id.*

Abutahoun v. Dow Chemical Co., 463 S.W.3d 42, 50 (Tex. 2015) (quoting DeWitt v. Harris Cnty., 904 S.W.2d 650, 653 (Tex.1995)). The cases interpreting this section have focused on several issues. First, what constitutes tangible personal property? Second, when do the plaintiff’s damages arise from the condition or use of personal property? Third, when is there sufficient nexus between the condition or use of property and the alleged injury told the governmental entity liable.

a. What constitutes “Tangible” Property?

While it is easy to define what constitutes tangible personal property, the courts have had considerable trouble applying the definition to records, documents and medical test results. The supreme court has defined tangible property to be “something that has a corporeal, concrete and palpable existence.” York, 871 S.W.2d at 178 (footnote omitted). Even without the York definition, medical instruments, hospital beds, tools, equipment, football helmets, props in plays, etc., are obviously personal property. See City of Baytown v. Townsend, 548 S.W.2d 935, 939 (Tex. Civ. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1977, writ ref’d n.r.e.) (bolt protruding from net post on municipal tennis courts was a piece of tangible property for which liability could attach); see also Univ. of Tex. M.D. Anderson Cancer Ctr. v. McKenzie, 578 S.W.3d 506, 509 (Tex. 2019) (chemotherapy bag and chemicals were tangible personal property that gave rise to waiver under TCA).

Before York, Texas courts had generally held that documents do not constitute tangible personal property. See Montoya v. John Peter Smith Hosp., 760 S.W.2d 361, 364 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 1988, pet. denied) (information written on a triage slip does not constitute tangible personal property, the use of which can give rise to liability); Seiler v. Guadalupe Hosp., 709 S.W.2d 37, 38-39 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1986, writ ref’d n.r.e.) (information in emergency room records do not constitute tangible personal property); Robinson v. City of San Antonio, 727 S.W.2d 40, 43 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 1987, writ ref’d n.r.e.) (protective order reduced to writing deemed not tangible property); Wilkins v. State, 716 S.W.2d 96, 98 (Tex.App.—Waco

<sup>9</sup> For four decades, Texas jurists have repeatedly expressed concerns about the difficulty of discerning the Legislature’s intended meaning behind the words ‘condition or use’ as they appear in the Texas Tort Claims Act, another tort-related statute. See, e.g., Tex. Dep’t of Crim. Justice v. Miller, 51 S.W.3d 583, 590 (Tex. 2001) (Hecht, J., concurring) (members of this Court ‘have repeatedly beseeched the Legislature for guidance’ on how to interpret the ‘use-of-

property standard’ in the Texas Tort Claims Act to no avail); (Tex. State Technical Coll. v. Beavers, 218 S.W.3d 258, 261 (Tex.App.—Texarkana 2007, no pet.) (“The courts of Texas have struggled to define the limits of ‘use’ and ‘condition’ ... under the Texas Tort Claims Act.”). “This Court has agreed, for purposes of the Texas Tort Claims Act, that the ‘condition or use’ provision is ‘difficult to understand and difficult to apply’ ....” Abutahoun v. Dow Chemical Co., 463 S.W.3d 42, 49 (Tex. Sup. May 8, 2015)



1986, writ ref’d n.r.e.) (permit authorizing use of state highway to transport mobile home was not a piece of tangible personal property).

With the York ruling, a line of decisions permitting governmental liability based on medical records and other documents based on liability for misuse of the machines that generated the documents has been effectively overruled. See, e.g., Tex. Youth Comm’n v. Ryan, 889 S.W.2d 340, 344-45 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1994, n.w.h.). In Salcedo v. El Paso Hosp. Dist., 659 S.W.2d 30, 33 (Tex. 1983), the supreme court held that a graph depicting results of an electrocardiogram was a piece of tangible personal property. The court reasoned that because the document reflected the results of a test performed by a piece of tangible property, the document must also be tangible personal property. *Id.* Similarly, the Beaumont Court of Appeals held that a plaintiff could recover against the Department of Corrections for the negligent sending of a telegram. Tex. Dep’t of Corrections v. Winters, 765 S.W.2d 531, 532 (Tex.App.—Beaumont 1989, writ denied). Cf. Thomas v. Brown, 927 S.W.2d 122, 127-28 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1996, writ denied) (policy implemented by Texas Department of Corrections was not tangible property and liability could not be based on enforcing policy). The Winters court concluded that the results of the use of tangible personal property, a computer system, were tangible personal property. *Id.* Although it stopped short of explicitly disapproving Salcedo, the supreme court’s decision in York has imposed a new rule of law with regard to allegedly negligent use of medical records and documents.

In York, the plaintiff’s medical record had noted a red and swollen hip and significant change in demeanor. York, 871 S.W.2d at 176. The treating physician was found at trial to have misused tangible property by failing to correctly interpret these symptoms as indicating a need to have the hip x-rayed, resulting in a delay in the diagnosis of a broken hip. *Id.* The supreme court rejected this reasoning, arguing instead that “[i]nformation ... is intangible; the fact that information is recorded in writing does not render the information tangible property.” *Id.* at 179. See also Tex. Dep’t of Pub. Safety v. Petta, 44 S.W.3d 575 (Tex. 2001) (while instructional manuals are tangible, the information contained in the manual is not tangible property, thus inadequacies in manuals cannot be the basis of suit under TCA because negligent training and supervision claims must be predicated on condition or use of tangible property); Kassen v. Hartley, 887 S.W.2d 4, 14 (Tex. 1994) (use, misuse or non-use of medical records, patient file, and emergency room procedures manual will not support a claim under TCA); Christus Spohn Health System, v. Young, 2014 WL 6602287, \*4 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi) (Nov. 20, 2014, no pet.). Young argued that the hospital caused delay in the

diagnosis of her injury through “misinterpretation of results of [her] CT scan,” “CT scan,” which worsened her condition. *Id.* The Court of appeals held that if medical diagnostic equipment is correctly used, “any subsequent misuse or nonuse of the information it reveals about a patient’s medical condition does not waive immunity” under the TCA because it was the use or non-use of the information, not the tangible property, which proximately caused the injury. *Id.*; see City of El Paso v. Wilkins, 281 S.W.3d 73, 75 (Tex.App.—El Paso 2008, no pet.) (See City of El Paso v. Wilkins, 281 S.W.3d 73, 75 (Tex.App.—El Paso 2008, no pet.) (where a police unit did not respond to a 911 emergency call until two and one-half hours after the call made, plaintiffs alleged that there was a problem with the telephones or computer systems used; there were no allegations that they “were in any defective or inadequate condition” or were misused and without any such allegations, the claims did not fall within the statutory waiver of immunity); Terry A. Leonard, P.A., 293 S.W.3d at 685, rev’d on other grounds Franka v. Velasquez, 332 S.W.3d 367, 379–80 (Tex. 2011) (holding the failure to review medical records that would have shown the prescribed medicine was contraindicated was not a use of property); Riggs v. City of Pearland, 177 F.R.D. 395, 406 (S.D. Tex. 1997) (allegations of inadequate medical care and treatment does not allege a “use of tangible property” with the ambit of the TCA); Marroquin v. Life Mgmt. Ctr., 927 S.W.2d 228, 230 (Tex.App.—El Paso 1996, writ dismissed w.o.j.) (“Injuries resulting from the misuse of information, even if that information is recorded in writing, does not provide a waiver of governmental immunity for injuries caused by the use of tangible personal property.”); Holland v. City of Houston, 41 F. Supp. 2d 678, 712 (S.D. Tex. 1999) (misinterpreting or reaching incorrect conclusions from information does not involve use of tangible property under TCA). The Salcedo holding was distinguished from this case by the reasoning that interpretation of the graph in that case was actually an intended use of the machine, and therefore within the waiver of immunity. York, 871 S.W.2d at 178.

The distinction is unsatisfactory; the logic of York suggests that Salcedo should have been overruled and it should not be relied upon in the future. The York court did, however, note that “Salcedo does not permit claims against the State for misuse of information.” *Id.* at 179. Thus, the new rule appears to be that any negligence action against the state based upon misuse of a report of any kind will be rejected on the grounds of the state’s sovereign immunity from the suit. See, e.g., Kelso v. Gonzales Healthcare Sys., 136 S.W.3d 377 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 2004, no pet.) (immunity not waived by allegation that results of EKG were improperly used); Salas v. Wilson Mem’l Hosp., 139 S.W.3d 398 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 2004, no pet.) (immunity not

waived by allegation that results of test for sexually transmitted disease (STD) were misused by staff’s failure to recognize that there was no STD).

The Texas Supreme Court has applied the York rationale outside the context of medical records. Dallas County v. Harper, 913 S.W.2d 207 (Tex. 1995), arose from a suit based upon a District Clerk’s releasing the plaintiff’s indictment for theft. The Waco Court of Appeals held that sovereign immunity did not bar the plaintiff’s claims against Dallas County because the indictment was “tangible personal property” within the definition of the TCA. *Id.* The supreme court reversed the court of appeals and rendered judgment for the County because:

In University of Tex. Med. Branch v. York, we held that simply reducing information to writing on paper does not make the information “tangible personal property.” ... An “indictment” is “the written statement of a grand jury accusing a person ... of some act or omission.” ... An indictment is no more than a grand jury’s pronouncement reduced to writing. It is not tangible personal property for purposes of waiver under the Texas Tort Claims Act in these circumstances.

*Id.* at 207–08 (citations omitted). Similarly, the failure to train, as well as the failure to furnish training materials and instructions to officers is not actionable because the property at issue is not tangible within the meaning of the TCA. Petta, 44 S.W.3d at 580–81 (immunity was not waived for claims of failure to train or provide training materials to law enforcement officers). Therefore, neither the use or misuse of information contained in governmental records, nor the release of governmental records can constitute a use or misuse of “personal property” that will give rise to liability under the TCA. *Id.*; York, 871 S.W.2d at 179; see also City of Dallas v. Rivera, 146 S.W.3d 334 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2004, no pet.) (city’s written force guidelines, training manuals, or other documentary evidence are not tangible personal property); Seamans, 934 S.W.2d at 393 (failure to transmit information regarding donation of daughter’s body to science not actionable); Marroquin, 927 S.W.2d at 230–31 (failure to use building was not use of tangible property).

b. What constitutes the “Use” of Personal Property.

(1) The Governmental Entity Must Use the Property.

Assuming the items in question constitute personal property, their condition or use gives rise to liability in three different ways. One basis of liability under section 101.021(2) is liability predicated upon injuries resulting from the negligent use of tangible property by an employee acting within the scope of his employment.

Winters, 765 S.W.2d at 532; Hein, 557 S.W.2d at 366. Thus, a governmental entity will be held liable for its agent’s use or misuse of personal property. *Id.*; see also Borrego v. City of El Paso, 964 S.W.2d 954, 957 (Tex.App.—El Paso 1998, pet. denied) (allegation of defect or inadequacy of tangible property is not necessary to state a cause of action if some use of the property as opposed to some condition of the property caused the injury). Negligent entrustment, however, does not state a cause of action under the TCA. Durbin v. City of Winnsboro, 135 S.W.3d 317, 321–25 (Tex.App.—Eastland 2004, pet. denied); Tex. Dep’t. of Criminal Justice v. Lone Star Gas Co., 978 S.W.2d 176, 178 (Tex.App.—Texarkana 1998, no pet.)

The Borrego decision demonstrates how an actionable injury can arise from use of property when there is no allegation that the property was defective. 964 S.W.2d at 957. In Borrego, the plaintiff was injured when he was strapped to a backboard after an auto accident. EMS technicians left Borrego tied to the board in the middle of the street. When a car came through police barriers, City personnel ran. Borrego could not move, and was hit by the car. There was no contention that the backboard was defective. Rather, the City was held liable because it was the negligent use of the property that caused the injury. *Id.* However, the Borrego decision is not to suggest that under the TCA, suit cannot be predicated upon injuries caused by defective property. In San Antonio State Hosp. v. Cowan, 128 S.W.3d 244 (Tex. 2004), the Texas Supreme Court confirmed that the “use” must be by the governmental unit, and that merely allowing someone to use his personal property does not constitute “use” such as to waive immunity. “[S]ince 1973 we have consistently defined ‘use’ to mean “to put or bring into action or service; to employ for or apply to a given purpose.” *Id.* at 246 (citations omitted). Therefore, the hospital did not waive immunity by allowing a suicidal patient to retain his walker and suspenders, which he then used to hang himself. The court distinguished the case of Overton Mem’l Hosp. v. McGuire, 518 S.W.2d 528 (Tex. 1975), in which a hospital waived immunity by its use of a hospital bed without rails. “The hospital did not merely allow the patient access to the bed; it actually put the patient in the bed as part of his treatment. The use of property respondents allege does not rise to this level.” *Id.*; see also Cowen, 128 S.W.3d at 246–47. Dallas Cnty. v. Posey, 290 S.W.3d 869 (Tex. 2009); Tex. Dep’t of Criminal Justice v. Hawkins, 169 S.W.3d 529, 533 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2005, no pet.) (holding that TDCJ’s allowing escaping convicts access to weapons, which the convicts later used to kill a security guard, did not constitute TDCJ’s using the weapons). Similarly in Harris County v. Annab, 547 S.W.3d 609 (Tex. 2018), the Texas Supreme Court held that the plaintiff’s allegation that the county enabled, authorized, or approved Caplan’s use of the firearm does

not amount to an allegation that the county used the firearm. Therefore, the court held that the allegation did not trigger the Tort Claims Act’s waiver of immunity. *Id.* See Tex. Tech Univ. Health Scis. Ctr. v. Bustillos, 556 S.W.3d 394 (Tex. App.—El Paso 2018)(claims of negligent supervision are claims for general medical negligence that do not involve the “use” of tangible property and do not fall within the waiver under the TCA).

In Rusk State Hospital, the Texas Supreme Court evaluated whether a plaintiffs’ pleadings and the trial court record could establish the “use” of property for a plastic bag that a psychiatric patient utilized to commit suicide. 392 S.W.3d at 97. The court again explained that Section 101.021(2) of the Act waives immunity for the use of tangible property, only when the governmental entity itself uses the property. *Id.* at 97. The court again explains that under the TCA a governmental entity does not “use” property within the meaning of the TCA when it “merely allows someone else to use it.” *Id.* For a waiver of immunity to be based on the condition of tangible property under Section 101.021(2), the condition of the property must approximately cause the injury or death.

A condition does not proximately cause an injury or death if it does no more than furnish the means to make the injury or death possible; that is, immunity is waived only if the condition (1) poses a hazard in the intended and ordinary use of the property and (2) actually causes an injury or death.

*Id.* at 97-98. The Supreme Court then addressed the Blacks’ claims with respect to the plastic bag that decedent used to attempt suicide. The Blacks pointed to evidence in the record that the hospital’s own policy classified a plastic bag as inherently dangerous for inpatient psychiatric hospitals. The Blacks’ pleadings asserted that the hospital was negligent in providing, furnishing, or allowing their son to have access to the bag and that this constituted the condition or use of tangible personal property for which immunity would be waived by the TCA.

The Supreme Court rejected the Blacks’ arguments noting that their contention about the use of property would mean that any time a governmental entity provided, furnished, or allowed access to tangible property it would constitute the use of property under the Act. *Id.* at 98. The court noted that it had previously held that in order for something to constitute a use of property, the governmental entity must put or bring the property into action or service and employ the property for or apply it to its given purpose. *Id.* The court noted that it had previously held in Cowan that the San Antonio State Hospital allowing a patient access to

suspenders and a walker, did not constitute the use of property within the meaning of Section 101.02(2).

Following Cowan, the Texas Supreme Court held that merely putting an inmate into a holding cell with a phone that had a cord attached was not actionable when the inmate hung himself on the cord. Posey, 290 S.W.3d at 871. The Supreme Court pointed out that liability under section 101.021(2) requires that the property be put to use by the governmental entity. *Id.* Additionally, in Dallas Metrocare Services v. Juarez, the Texas Supreme Court once again evaluated whether a plaintiff’s pleadings and the trial court record could establish the “use” of property for a white board that fell and injured a patient. 420 S.W.3d 39, 40 (Tex. 2013). The court, relying on Rusk, rejected the notion that Juarez’ injury arose from the organization’s “use” of property because the organization did not “use” the white board within the meaning of the Act by merely making it available for use. *Id.*

Lower courts have continued to follow the “non-use” rationale. See, e.g., Oakbend Med. Ctr. v. Martinez, 515 S.W.3d 536, 543 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2017, no pet.) (failure to use restraints for patient on bed were non-use of property that could not result in waiver); City of Hous. v. Gutkowski, 532 S.W.3d 855 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2017, no pet.) (alleged failure to use necessary lifting equipment for medical procedure was non-use that did not support waiver).

Furthermore, there is no waiver of immunity where the property is “used” for the purpose of committing an intentional tort. City of Watauga v. Gordon, 434 S.W.3d at 592-93(excessive force suit based on handcuffs being too tight was barred by TCA’s exclusion of intentional tort claims); Texas Department of Criminal Justice v. Campos, 384 S.W.3d 810 (Tex. 2012). The plaintiffs in Campos alleged the officers used tangible personal property for the purpose of helping them perpetuate intentional torts, sexually assaulting the plaintiffs. *Id.* at 814. The plaintiffs asserted that the TCA waived immunity for their claims against the department because the officers used tangible personal property to carry out the assaults. *Id.* The Texas Supreme Court held that because liability for intention torts is expressly excluded from liability under the TCA, where the property was only used for the purpose of committing an intentional tort there is no waiver of immunity under the TCA. *Id.*; see also Petta, 44 S.W.3d at 576 (officer hitting the plaintiff’s window and shooting out her tires for the purpose of committing a sexual assault was not a use of property because those actions were intentional and fell within the exclusions for claims arising from intentional torts); City of Fort Worth v. Deal, 552 S.W.3d 366 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth 2018)(Claim barred by the intentional-tort exception because the police officer’s use of road spike deployment was a battery, and the plaintiff did not

otherwise allege a distinct negligence claim; plaintiff was unable to prove a distinct negligence claim that did not arise out of the battery. The court held that the negligence claim must be distinct from the intentional tort, and must not “arise out of” the intentional tort. The court held that the plaintiff’s negligence claim was completely subsumed by the intentional tort.). See also Tex. Tech Univ. Health Scis. Ctr. v. Bustillos, 556 S.W.3d 394 (Tex. App.—El Paso 2018)(claims based on medical facility/professional’s failure to receive informed consent do not fall within a waiver provision of the Texas Tort Claims Act. The Texas Tort Claims Act does not waive sovereign immunity for the intentional torts of assault and battery).

The intentional tort exception can be fairly broad when a plaintiff’s case is improperly pleaded: in City of Fort Worth v. Deal, No. 02-17-00413-CV, 2018 Tex. App. LEXIS 3918 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth May 31, 2018, no pet.), the court concluded that plaintiff’s pleadings established that the intentional deployment of a tire deflation device was an intentional battery rather than negligence, and there was no waiver of immunity as a result. *Id.* at \*11–13.

(2) There Must be a Nexus Between the Condition of the Property and Injury.

Moreover, Posey reinforces the requirement that there must be a nexus between the condition of the property and the injury. 290 S.W.3d at 872. “To find proximate cause, there must be a nexus between the condition of the property and the injury.” *Id.* While the phone cord allowed Posey to commit suicide, there was nothing defective about the cord which caused injury to Posey. *Id.* Similarly, if a landowner fails to show the necessary nexus between the alleged use of property and his injuries, then the use of property is inadequate as a matter of law to support a lawsuit. Tex. Parks & Wildlife Dep’t v. E.E. Lowery Realty, Ltd., 235 S.W.3d 692 (Tex. 2007) (holding that fire caused during repair work on dock was insufficient to support claim based on use of a motor vehicle); Christus Spohn Health System, Corp. v. Young, 2014 WL 6602287, \*4 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi-Edinburg Nov. 20, 2014, no pet.) (plaintiff’s allegations do not imply that the actual use or misuse of the stethoscopes caused plaintiff’s injuries; any purported misuse of the stethoscope neither hurt her nor made her ureteral injury worse in and of itself).

When medicine is properly administered, *i.e.*, according to the non-state physician’s directive, there is no condition or use of property that will result in a waiver of immunity. Somervell Cnty. Healthcare Auth. v. Sanders, 169 S.W.3d 724 (Tex.App.—Waco 2005, no pet.) (holding that giving medication as directed by patient’s private physician did not constitute waiver of immunity even though medication had tendency to

exacerbate patient’s fall risk and patient ultimately died from a fall).

The condition of the plaintiff does not alter the scope of the governmental entity’s duty under the Act. The plaintiffs in both Posey and Cowan argued that the governmental entity was liable because they knew, or should have known, of the suicidal ideation of the patient/inmate. In both instances, the Texas Supreme Court rejected this argument. “Posey’s parents argue that the county failed to properly assess Posey as a suicide risk.... However, the quality of Posey’s [suicide] assessment has no bearing on the county’s immunity. In Cowan, we held that immunity was not waived even though the patient was committed for having suicidal tendencies. ... So, even if Posey had apparent suicidal tendencies, the county would still be immune under Cowan because it did no more than place Posey in a cell with a corded telephone which he, himself, used to commit suicide. Posey, 290 S.W.3d at 872.

Finally, decisions regarding the location of tangible property may not be actionable. Campos, 384 S.W.3d at 815. In Campos the plaintiffs alleged the failure to locate surveillance cameras within the correctional facility was a use of property. *Id.* The Texas Supreme Court held that the improper placement or location of cameras were not a “use” of property under the TCA. *Id.*

(3) The Property Must Be Defective.

Another way that the state may waive its immunity is by furnishing property that is defective, inadequate or lacking an integral safety component. Jenkins v. Tex. Dep’t of Criminal Justice, 2004 WL 1117171, p. 3 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi-Edinburg May 20, 2004, no pet.); McBride v. TDCJ-ID, 964 S.W.2d 18, 22 (Tex.App.—Tyler 1997, no pet.); Tex. Dep’t of MHMR v. McClain, 947 S.W.2d 694, 697–98 (Tex.App.—Austin 1997, writ denied); and Tex. Dep’t of Corrections v. Jackson, 661 S.W.2d 154, 158 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st. Dist.] 1983, writ ref’d n.r.e.). Additionally, that the act causing the injury was undertaken by a third party does not relieve the state from liability. McClain, 947 S.W.2d at 697; see also Lowe, 540 S.W.2d at 300–01; Overton Mem’l Hosp. v. McGuire, 518 S.W.2d 528, 529 (Tex. 1975); Tex. State Technical College v. Beavers, 218 S.W.3d 258 (Tex.App.—Texarkana 2007, no pet.). In these cases, the agent supplies the instrumentality through which the plaintiff is injured. Lowe, 540 S.W.2d at 300 (“[W]e hold that the affirmative allegation of furnishing defective equipment to Lowe states a case within the statutory waiver of immunity arising from some condition or some use of tangible property.”); McGuire, 518 S.W.2d at 528–29 (“We believe that injuries proximately caused by negligently providing a bed without bed rails are proximately caused by some

condition or some use of tangible property under circumstances where a private person would be liable.”); Tarrant Cnty. Hosp. Dist. v. Henry, 52 S.W.3d 434 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 2001, no pet.); City of Midland v. Sullivan, 33 S.W.3d 1, 7–8 (Tex.App.—El Paso 2000, pet. dismissed w.o.j.) (“The injury must be proximately caused by the condition or use of the property.”).

The Fourteenth Court and the Waco Courts of Appeals have recently disagreed on whether immunity is waived when medical equipment is misused, causing the plaintiff’s illness to be improperly diagnosed. In Univ. of Tex. Med. Branch v. Thompson, 2006 WL 1675401 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] June 6, 2006, no pet.), the court held that sovereign immunity was not waived when the plaintiff’s appendicitis went undiagnosed by use of stethoscopes and other equipment in such a way that medical personnel failed to recognize the illness, because the real substance of the suit was failure to detect and treat the illness. In Univ. of Tex. Med. Branch v. Blackmon, 169 S.W.3d 712 (Tex.App.—Waco 2005, pet. granted), vacated for lack of jurisdiction, 195 S.W.3d 98 (Tex. 2006), the court held that improper use of a stethoscope and pulse oxymeter caused the failure to diagnose the plaintiff’s pneumonia and thus immunity was waived. The facts in Blackmon were egregious, including the plaintiff prisoner turning blue, her fellow inmates yelling to no avail for her to be given medical attention, and her dying in her room within twelve hours of her last visit to the clinic.

In Rusk State Hospital, the Supreme Court rejected the argument that the plaintiff’s could establish a waiver of immunity based on the “condition or use” or property where the property, a plastic bag used to commit suicide was not defective. Rusk State Hospital, 392 S.W.3d at 98. In Rusk State Hospital, the plaintiffs contended that the plastic bag used by their son constituted a condition of personal property identical to the condition of the football player’s uniform that the Supreme Court found was a condition or use of property in Lowe v. Texas Tech University, 540 S.W.2d 297 (Tex. 1976). The Supreme Court, however, pointed out that in Lowe, the plaintiff, a football player, was ordered to remove his knee brace and re-enter the game and play without the brace. Lowe, 540 S.W.2d at 302. The Supreme Court then explained that the holding in Lowe was based on the fact that Texas Tech had effectively given Lowe a uniform that was defective because it lacked a knee brace. *Id.* at 99. The court pointed out that it had limited the holding in Lowe to cases in which a governmental actor provides property that lacks an integral safety component and the lack of the integral safety component caused the plaintiff’s injuries. *Id.* (citing Kerrville State Hosp. v. Clark, 923 S.W.2d 582, 585 (Tex. 1996)). By contrast, the Supreme Court pointed out that the plastic bag at issue was not inherently unsafe. *Id.* “[T]he TCA

waives immunity for an inherently dangerous condition of tangible personal property only if the condition poses a hazard when the property is put to its intended and ordinary use, which the plastic bag was not.” *Id.* The court rejected the contention that the plastic bag was inherently unsafe and constituted a condition for which suit could be brought under the TCA because there were no inherently dangerous aspects to the bag that made the decedent’s death possible. *Id.*

#### (4) “Use” versus “Non-Use” of Property

The third means of potential liability under Section 101.021(2) is for the non-use of property. Whether, liability can arise from the non-use of personal property has been a question of reoccurring debate and uncertainty. Until 1989, numerous courts had held the non-use of property could not form the basis of a claim for “condition or use of personal property” under the Act. *Cf.* Tex. Dep’t of Corrections v. Herring, 513 S.W.2d 6 (Tex. 1974) (failure to provide adequate medical care and treatment does not constitute an allegation of the use of tangible property within the TCA); Diaz v. Central Plains Reg’l Hosp., 802 F.2d 141 (5th Cir. 1986) (refusal to admit patient does not fall within waiver of governmental immunity for the condition or use of tangible property); Vela v. Cameron Cnty., 703 S.W.2d 721 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1985, writ refused n.r.e.) (failure to provide life guards and/or life saving measures did not constitute negligent condition or use of tangible property). This all seemed to change with the supreme court’s opinion in Robinson v. Central Tex. Mental Health and Mental Retardation Ctr., 780 S.W.2d 169 (Tex. 1989). The plaintiff in Robinson alleged that her son died because he was not provided with a life jacket when taken swimming by MHMR employees. *Id.* at 169. The supreme court held that the failure to provide a life preserver was a condition or use of personal property. *Id.* at 171. *See* Lowe, 540 S.W.2d at 300 (the failure to provide a football player with protective equipment constituted actionable use of property). *But cf.* Marroquin, 927 S.W.2d at 230 (decision to keep doors unlocked on the inside of building was not an incomplete use of tangible property).

Thereafter, relying on supreme court opinions in Robinson and Lowe, the plaintiffs in Kassen brought suit claiming that non-use of medication was an actionable use of personal property under the TCA. The supreme court rejected this argument and noted:

We have never held that a non-use of property can support a claim under the Texas Tort Claims Act. Section 101.021, which requires the property’s condition or use to cause the injury, does not support this interpretation. *See* LeLeaux, 835 S.W.2d at 51 (stating that “use” means “to put or bring into action or

service; to employ for or apply to a given purpose”). ... We conclude that the non-use of available drugs during emergency medical treatment is not a use of tangible personal property that triggers waiver of sovereign immunity [under the TCA].

Kassen, 887 S.W.2d at 14 (some citations omitted). The supreme court reiterated the Kassen rationale in Kerrville State Hosp. v. Clark, 923 S.W.2d 582 (Tex. 1995). Clark holds that the “failure to administer an injectable drug is ‘non-use’ of tangible personal property and therefore does not fall under the waiver provisions of the Act.” *Id.*; see also Univ. of Tex. MD Anderson Cancer Ctr. v. Contreras, 576 S.W.3d 439, 446 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2019, no pet.) (furnishing IV pole to patient to use as walker was equivalent to prescription, and therefore non-use of property); Dallas Cnty. v. Alegjo, 243 S.W.3d 21 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2007, no pet.) (failure to administer a different anti-psychotic medicine was not a use of property); McCall v. Dallas Cnty. Hosp. Dist., 997 S.W.2d 287, 289–90 (Tex.App.—Eastland 1999, no pet.) (hospital’s failure to use available medical equipment is not actionable under the TCA); accord, Spindletop MHMR Ctr. v. Beauchamp, 130 S.W.3d 368, 371 (Tex.App.—Beaumont 2004, pet. denied).

Despite the strong language of the Kassen opinion, there appears to be limited room for continued application of the Robinson and Lowe holdings. In Clark, the supreme court explained:

[Robinson and Lowe] represent perhaps the outer bounds of what we have defined as use of tangible personal property. We did not intend, in deciding these cases, to allow both use and non-use of property to result in waiver of immunity under the Act. Such a result would be tantamount to abolishing governmental immunity, contrary to the limited waiver the Legislature clearly intended. The precedential value of these cases is therefore limited to claims in which a plaintiff alleges that a state actor has provided property that lacks an integral safety component and that the lack of this integral component led to the plaintiff’s injuries. For example, if a hospital provided a patient with a bed lacking bed rails and the lack of this protective equipment led to the patient’s injury, the Act’s waiver provisions would be implicated.

*Id.* at 585 (citations omitted, emphasis added).<sup>10</sup> See also Beavers, 218 S.W.3d at 260; Weeks v. Harris Cnty. Hosp. Dist., 785 S.W.2d 169 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1990, writ denied). Thus, the imposition of liability in Lowe and Robinson is appropriate under the TCA when the plaintiff: (1) was provided with defective equipment; or (2) was not provided with safety equipment that would necessarily accompany the items that were provided.

The holding in City of North Richland Hills v. Friend, 370 S.W.3d 369 (Tex. 2012), reiterates the Texas Supreme Court’s holding in Kassen that the nonuse of property will rarely state a cause of action under the TCA. Sara Friend collapsed while standing in line at a water park owned by the City of North Richland Hills. City employees attempted to resuscitate Friend but were unable to retrieve a defibrillator from a storage closet in the park. Sara Friend ultimately died and her family brought suit against the City alleging that the failure to use a defibrillator constituted a condition or use of personal property actionable under the TCA. *Id.*

City of Dallas v. Sanchez points out how the same facts can give rise to claims based on the use and non-use of property. City of Dallas v. Sanchez, 449 S.W.3d 645 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2014, pet. filed), rev’d on other grounds City of Dallas v. Sanchez, 494 S.W.3d 722, 724–25 (Tex. 2016)(reversing on the grounds the plaintiff’s could not establish proximate cause). . The City of Dallas received two 911 calls regarding a drug overdose from the same complex. One of the calls was disconnected before EMS arrived and the operator did not call back or determine whether the two calls were redundant. The Dallas Court of Appeals held that allegations regarding the failure of (1) a City to determine that there were two separate 911 calls from two separate locations within the same apartment complex; (2) the 911 employee’s hanging up the phone before the arrival of the responders; and (3) the 911 employee’s failure to redial the caller were allegations of the nonuse of property and not actionable under the TCA. *Id.* at 651. Also the failure to use the telephone and computer systems to determine that the two calls regarding a drug overdose at an apartment complex were not redundant, was a claim based on the non-use of property. See On occasion, the same facts can give rise to claims based on both the use and non-use of property. Compare City of N. Richland Hills v. Friend, 370 S.W.3d 369, 372 (Tex. 2012) (claim that City failed to retrieve and use automatic external defibrillator device to revive swimmer at water park was non-use claim, not sufficient to waive City’s immunity); and City of El Paso v. Hernandez, 16 S.W.3d 409, 411 (Tex.App.—El Paso 2000, pet. denied), where appellees

<sup>10</sup> The Clark opinion defines the use of property as putting or

bringing the property “into action or service; to employ for or apply to a given purpose.” Clark, 923 S.W.2d at 584; Marroquin, 927 S.W.2d at 230-31.

alleged that the delay in dispatching an ambulance from one El Paso hospital to another resulted in the death; the court concluded that “the gravamen of Appellees’ complaint is that EMS personnel made an incorrect medical decision” about whether Hernandez had a life-threatening emergency, which was a complaint “about a non-use of the vehicle” and did not fall within Section 101.021’s waiver of immunity).

However, as the Dallas Court of Appeals decision in *Sanchez* holds, allegations regarding a malfunction of the telephone system in its use by the 911 operator was an actionable claim for the condition of property. “A failure or malfunction of the equipment allegedly cut off the caller before the call was completed and contributed to the City’s failure to provide emergency medical attention to Matthew. These allegations were sufficient to allege that a condition of tangible personal property caused injury.” *Sanchez*, 449 S.W.3d at 652, rev’d on other grounds *City of Dallas v. Sanchez*, 494 S.W.3d 722, 724–25 (Tex. 2016) (reversing on the grounds the plaintiff’s could not establish proximate cause). See also *Michael v. Travis Cnty. Hous. Auth.*, 995 S.W.2d 909, 913–14 (Tex.App.—Austin 1999, no pet.) (allegation that two pit bulls escaped through defective fence and attacked two children sufficiently alleged that condition or use of tangible personal property caused injury).

While the Texas Supreme Court acknowledged earlier cases holding that the failure to use property could be actionable under the TCA it reinforced that nonuse of equipment will rarely be actionable under the TCA. The Court began by pointing out that it is well-settled that mere nonuse of property does not suffice to invoke Section 101.021(2)’s waiver of immunity from suit. *Friend*, 370 S.W.3d at 372. The Court acknowledged that the *Lowe* and *Robinson* decisions held that where the property used lacked an “integral safety component” then failure to use property stated a cause of action within Section 101.021(2) of the TCA. *Id.* The Court found that if *Friend*’s allegation that the failure to use the defibrillator constituted a claim that an “integral safety component” was missing, then a plaintiff could always state a cause of action by identify some type or piece of equipment that could have been used in a particular instance. *Id.* at 373. “Such a formulation threatens to eviscerate any limiting principle on ‘condition or use’ entirely and would enable plaintiffs . . . to enlarge the scope of the waiver provided by Section 101.021(2) . . .” *Id.* The supreme court also noted that adopting the plaintiff’s argument that identifying a related piece of equipment that was not used as meeting the integral safety component exception “would create a disincentive for governmental units to provide any form of health or safety equipment at their establishments. Counsel for the Friends acknowledged at oral argument that the Friends’ theory would, paradoxically, fail if the City had stood by and watched

Sara die rather than attempt to use the oxygen mask and other airway equipment [to save her life].” *Id.*

The Fort Worth Court of Appeals cited *Robinson* and *Lowe* in holding that immunity was waived because ice scoops were integral safety components of ice barrels, and the lack of the scoops caused injuries. *Univ. of N. Tex. v. Harvey*, 124 S.W.3d 216 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 2003, pet. denied); see also *Posey*, 290 S.W.3d 869, 871 (failure to replace phone with one that did not have a cord was misuse or non-use of property, neither of which is actionable under the TCA). In *Harvey*, a participant in a drill camp at the University of North Texas sued after she contracted severe food poisoning there. The camp staff had placed ice out in barrels for the campers to use, but did not provide scoops. Witnesses testified that there was debris in the ice and that it was not safe to provide the ice without scoops. 73% of the campers who consumed the ice became ill. Plaintiff’s expert testified that the E. coli outbreak was likely caused by the ice. The court held, however, that sovereign immunity was not waived for strict liability claims or for negligence claims based on failure to wash food, undercooking food, or lack of hygiene in food preparation. *Id.* at 224–25; see also *Beavers*, 218 S.W.3d at 260.

A patient in a state hospital, however, cannot prove a waiver of immunity by alleging that he was provided property lacking an integral safety component when he is really alleging a failure to care for or supervise him. *State v. King*, 2003 WL 22839389 (Tex.App.—Tyler Nov. 26, 2003, pet. denied) (hospital staff’s failure to monitor suicidal patient who then hung himself with his shoelaces, was not waiver of immunity by providing beds without sufficient identification and shoes with shoelaces). Note that *King* was decided before *Cowan*, discussed above. Presumably if the Tyler court had had the benefit of the *Cowan* opinion, the Tyler court could have had yet another rationale to support its holding.

#### (5) There Must Be a Nexus Between the Use of the Property and Plaintiffs Injuries.

Regardless of the basis on which the plaintiff seeks to establish liability under 101.021(2), she must prove a nexus between the property at issue and injuries that are the basis of the suit. *Posey*, 290 S.W.3d 869. The property itself need not be the instrumentality of the alleged injury, but it must have been a contributing factor to the injury. See *Holder*, 954 S.W.2d at 807; *Gonzales v. City of El Paso*, 978 S.W.2d 619, 623 (Tex.App.—El Paso 1998, no pet); *Salcedo*, 659 S.W.2d at 32; *Smith*, 946 S.W.2d at 501. As pointed out by the Texas Supreme Court, medical personnel in state medical facilities “use some form of tangible personal property nearly every time they treat a patient,” and that, because of this fact, a patient suing for negligence could always complain that a different form of treatment than the one employed would have been more effective and

still claim waiver under the [TCA].” Kerrville State Hosp. v. Clark, 923 S.W.2d 582, 585–86 (Tex. 1996). To conclude that all of these complaints are enough to constitute the use of tangible personal property under the TCA would render the doctrine of sovereign immunity a nullity, which is not what the Legislature intended in acting the TCA. See Id. at 586. Thus the requirement of causation under the TCA mandates more than mere involvement of property; property does not cause injury if it does no more than further the condition that makes the injury possible. See Bossley, 968 S.W.2d at 343.

However, there is no bright line test of exactly how much involvement is required to establish causation. First, “[f]or a defective condition to be the basis for complaint, the defect must pose a hazard in the intended and ordinary use of the property.” Posey, 290 S.W.3d at 872 (while the cord on the phone allowed the inmate to commit suicide, there was no defect in the cord which caused an injury); Miller, 51 S.W.3d at 588 (misuse of medication that masked illness is not use of property that caused the injury); Bossley, 968 S.W.2d at 342–43; Holder, 954 S.W.2d at 807. Second, the property does not cause the injury if it does no more than furnish the condition that makes the injury possible. Posey, 290 S.W.3d 869, 872 (the exposed wires on the telephone cord would have been actionable if they had caused electric shock to the inmate, but the fact that the exposed wires allowed inmate to hang himself, was not actionable); Bossley, 968 S.W.2d at 343 (citing Union Pump Co. v. Allbritton, 898 S.W.2d 773, 776 (Tex. 1995)); accord Robinson, 171 S.W.3d at 369 (for the use of property to be the basis of liability, it must be the instrumentality of the harm); Ordonez v. El Paso Cnty., 224 S.W.3d 240 (Tex.App.—El Paso 2005, no pet.) (no waiver when arrestee killed after being placed in prison holding tank with rival gang members); Hawkins, 169 S.W.3d at 533–35 (no waiver when security guard was shot by escaped convicts using a gun stolen from the prison during the escape when the shooting occurred 11 days and 300 miles after the escape); Tex. Tech Univ. v. Gates, 2004 WL 2559937 (Tex.App.—Amarillo Nov. 9, 2004, pet. denied) (use of adjustable awning and tape for play stage ceased when stage completed; their presence only created condition that made student’s fall possible); King, 2003 WL 22839389, at p. 3–4 (hospital staff’s confusion about which bed suicidal patient was in, and subsequent failure to monitor him, was not use of bed such as to waive immunity); Webb Cnty. v. Sandoval, 126 S.W.3d 264, 267 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 2003, no pet.) (nothing about chicken nuggets caused the child to choke; rather it was her failure to chew them). Similarly, the failure to install elevated lifeguard stands or position them so they could see the entire pool were not instrumentality that caused the child to drown, and therefore there was no nexus between the personal property and injury at issue. Henry v. City of Angleton,

2014 WL 5465704, 4 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] Oct. 28, 2014, no pet.); see also Dimas v. Tex. State Univ. Sys., 201 S.W.3d 260, 267 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2006, no pet.) (“[A]lthough malfunctioning light timers may have caused the area near [the scene] to be dark, thus furnishing the condition that made the attack possible, this condition does not establish the requisite causal nexus....”); Fryman v. Wilbarger Gen. Hosp., 207 S.W.3d 440, 441–42 (Tex.App.—Amarillo 2006, no pet.) (sovereign immunity not waived where hospital grounds were simply location of assault, pleadings do not show hospital grounds caused assault, and plaintiff complained about failure to use or, in effect, non-use of property). But see Delaney v. Univ. of Houston, 835 S.W.2d 56, 59 (Tex. 1992) (university could be held liable for rape of student in her dorm room based on its failure to repair a broken lock on the door of the dorm that allowed the attacker to enter the building).

The use of the property must have been directly involved in the injury for there to be a waiver of immunity and not be geographically, or temporarily attenuated from injury. Compare Dallas County Mental Health & Mental Retardation v. Bossley, 968 S.W.2d 339, 343 (Tex.1998) (escaped mental patient’s death on a freeway was “distant geographically, temporally, and causally” from the unlocked doors through which he escaped) and Churchwell v. City of Big Spring, 2004 WL 905951 (Tex.App.—Eastland April 29, 2004, no pet.) (no waiver of immunity when dog was released from city pound two weeks before he attacked plaintiff) with Michael v. Travis Cnty. Hous. Auth., 995 S.W.2d 909, 913–14 (Tex.App.—Austin 1999, no pet.) (allegation that two pit bulls escaped through defective fence and attacked two children sufficiently alleged that condition or use of tangible personal property proximately caused injuries, as required by TCA Section 101.021(2)).section 101.021(2)).

In City of Dallas v. Sanchez, the plaintiffs alleged that a malfunction of the telephone system, prematurely disconnecting the call between the 911 operator and the caller, was a cause of their son’s death. 494 S.W.3d 722, 727 (Tex. 2016). The decedent died of a drug overdose after “emergency responders erroneously concluded separate 9-1-1 calls were redundant and left the apartment complex without checking the specific apartment unit the dispatcher had provided to them.” The court of appeals denied the City’s motion to dismiss under Texas Rule of Civil procedure 91a, but the Supreme Court of Texas reversed on the basis that the condition of the property was “too attenuated from the cause of Sanchez’s death—a drug overdose—to be a proximate cause.” Id. at 727. The Supreme Court concluded that immunity was not waived because the plaintiffs did not show proximate cause on the face of the pleadings. Id. This shows the importance of



demonstrating a causal nexus between the condition and the injury on the face of the pleadings.

5. Section 101.022: Standard of Liability for All Premises and Special Defect Cases.

While Section 101.021(2) establishes liability for the condition or use of real property, its application is very limited as a result of another provision of the TCA. Section 101.022 establishes the standard of liability for all premises and special defect cases. Suits involving premises or special defect must be tried in accordance with Section 101.022 or the defendant is entitled to judgment as a matter of law. *See York II*, 284 S.W.3d at 847–48 (failure to get jury finding on ordinary defect meant there was no waiver of sovereign immunity); *Koblizek*, 752 S.W.2d at 657 (plaintiff’s failure to obtain jury findings as to the elements of a premises liability case means the governmental unit cannot be held liable); *Carson*, 599 S.W.2d at 852 (same). Consequently, claims that appear to arise out of defects in real property are usually brought under Section 101.022.

Liability under Section 101.021 has arisen only in cases where the plaintiff is injured from negligence involving activities conducted on real property and not as a result of defects in the real property. *See Smith*, 664 S.W.2d at 187–90. As discussed previously, *Smith* involved injuries sustained during a track meet held on real property owned by the University of Texas. *Id.* Liability did not arise from a defect in the real property, but from the use of the property for a track meet. *Id.* The Austin Court of Appeals held that the plaintiff could maintain an action for injuries he sustained as a result of the use of the real property for a track meet. *Id.*; *see also Genzer v. City of Mission*, 666 S.W.2d 116, 120–21 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1983, writ ref’d n.r.e.) (property used for fireworks display).

An argument can be made that every action taken by a governmental employee occurs on real property. However, to afford plaintiffs a cause of action for injuries sustained while “using” the real property would effectively abrogate the TCA.

6. Joint Enterprise Liability Under Section 101.021(2).

Under the TCA, a governmental entity that enters into a joint enterprise is liable for the torts of other members of the joint enterprise. *See Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Able*, 35 S.W.3d 608, 616 (Tex. 2000). *Able* arose out of an auto accident that occurred in a high occupancy vehicle (“HOV”) lane on U.S. Highway 290. The Ables collided head-on with a vehicle driving with its lights off in the wrong direction down the HOV lane. The operation and control of the HOV lane, including the barriers that would stop a car from driving the wrong way down the HOV lane, were under the control of the Houston Metropolitan Transit Authority (“Metro”). The

jury found that Metro was negligent and grossly negligent. The jury also found that the Texas Department of Transportation (“TxDOT”) was not negligent but that TxDOT was engaged in a joint enterprise with Metro related to the operation of the HOV lane on the day of the accident. Based upon the joint enterprise finding, the trial court entered a judgment against TxDOT that was affirmed by the court of appeals.

In its appeal to the Texas Supreme Court, TxDOT sought to have the judgment reversed on the grounds that there was no waiver of immunity under the TCA that would allow it to be held liable once the jury had found that TxDOT was not negligent. In the alternative, TxDOT argued there was no evidence to support the jury’s finding that TxDOT had entered into a joint enterprise with Metro.

The supreme court turned first to the contention that there was no waiver of immunity under which TxDOT could be held liable. The court pointed out that §101.021(2) provides liability for the condition or use of real or personal property when a governmental entity would be liable to the plaintiff if the governmental entity was a private person. *See id.* at 612–13. The court pointed out that subsection 2, unlike section 101.021, does not require a governmental employee to have been negligent as a condition precedent to the governmental entity’s being liable to the plaintiff. *See id.* at 612. The court then noted that

in the context of private parties ... “the theory of joint enterprise is to make each party thereto the agent of the other and thereby to hold each responsible for the negligent act of the other.” If there is a joint enterprise between Metro and TxDOT, and if TxDOT would have been liable for Metro’s negligence had TxDOT been a private person, then we must conclude that the state had waived its immunity and that TxDOT is liable under the plain meaning of section 101.021(2).

*Id.* at 613 (quoting *Shoemaker v. Estate of Whistler*, 513 S.W.2d 10, 14 (Tex. 1974)).

The court then turned to TxDOT’s complaint that there was no evidence to support the jury’s finding that it had entered into a joint enterprise with Metro. The court pointed out that under Texas law there are four elements of a joint enterprise: (1) an express or implied agreement among the members of the group, (2) a common purpose to be carried out by the group, (3) a community of pecuniary interest among the members of the group, and (4) an equal right to voice in the management of the joint enterprise that gives each party an equal right of control. TxDOT asserted that the plaintiffs failed to produce evidence of a common pecuniary interest or an equal right of control.

With regard to a common pecuniary interest, the supreme court pointed out that the Master Agreement entered into by TxDOT and Metro regarding the construction and operation of the HOV lanes stated that “the parties also acknowledge that the construction, operation, and maintenance of the transit ways involves the investment of substantial sums for mass transit purposes.” *Id.* at 614. The court went on to note that the construction of the HOV lanes involved the use of federal, state, and local funds. *See id.* The court concluded that there was a common pecuniary interest because

[t]he Master Agreement plainly recognizes that the Transitway Project involved substantial sums of money and contemplated a sharing of resources in order to make better use of this money. It may well have been that the monetary and personal savings produced from the pooling of resources was substantial. The documents also clearly contemplate an economic gain that could be realized by undertaking the activities in this manner. The Transitway Project was not a matter of “friendly or family cooperation and accommodation” but was instead a transaction by two parties that had a community of pecuniary interest in that purpose.

Next, the court considered whether there was any evidence to support the jury’s finding that TxDOT had an equal right of control. The court began by noting that an equal right to control means “‘each [participant] must have an authoritative voice or, . . . must have some voice and right to be heard.’” *Id.* (quoting *Shoemaker*, 513 S.W.2d at 16). With this predicate, the court pointed out that under the Master Agreement, Metro was primarily responsible for day-to-day operations and maintenance of the HOV lanes, but the HOV lanes affected operations of a controlled-access highway that was under TxDOT’s control. “[T]herefore, [TxDOT] has an interest and responsibility in the operation and maintenance of [the HOV lanes].” The court pointed out that the Master Agreement states that TxDOT had ultimate control and supervision of the highway upon which the HOV lanes were constructed. *See id.* at 615. TxDOT argued that the Master Agreement gave Metro sole control over the enterprise and that it had no equal right of control. *See id.* The supreme court rejected this argument stating that “a member of a joint enterprise [cannot] escape liability to a third party simply by delegating responsibility for [a] component of the joint enterprise that caused injury to the third party . . . .” *Id.*

The court also pointed out that TxDOT had employees that were members of the Transitway Management Team. The Team met monthly to address issues including operation plans for the HOV lanes. Additionally, any amendments or changes to the operation plans for the HOV lanes could be made only with consent of both TxDOT and Metro. *See id.* at 616. Finally, the Team developed Transitway rules that were designed to insure safe and effective operation of the HOV lanes and was responsible for evaluating and recommending changes to traffic control devices used in connection with the HOV lanes. Thus, the court concluded that while Metro employees may have carried out procedures and been principally responsible for day-to-day operations of the HOV lanes, TxDOT had a voice and a right to be heard in matters affecting the day-to-day operations. The court overruled TxDOT’s point of error that there was no evidence to support the jury’s finding of joint enterprise. *See id.*<sup>11</sup>

The *Able* case has far reaching implications for suits brought under the TCA for condition or use of real or personal property. Governmental entities frequently enter into agreements related to maintenance and operations of roadways. However, in *Sipes*, the Fort Worth court of appeals considered whether an agreement where the State would improve the highway and the City would fund improvements and do other work was a waiver of immunity. Although the City had “a voice to be heard concerning limited aspects of the construction,” the court found that there was no joint enterprise because the City did not have equal control over the construction project. *Sipes v. City of Grapevine*, 146 S.W.3d 273 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 2004, pet. filed) rev’d on other grounds, *City of Grapevine v. Sipes*, 195 S.W.3d 689 (Tex. 2006). These agreements may be sufficient to create a joint enterprise between the parties. Under the *Able* decision, if a plaintiff is able to establish liability of any party to that agreement, each other party will also be liable. Moreover, governmental entities frequently enter into agreements related to the operation of facilities that are funded jointly. Each of these agreements may be sufficient to create a joint enterprise under which each will be liable for the negligence of another party related to the condition or use of personal property. *But see Sipes*, 146 S.W.3d at 273. In fact, a substantial number of governmental entities are reporting that they are seeing a dramatic number of joint enterprise claims since the supreme court released its opinion in *Able*.

Joint enterprise no longer appears to be a viable means of recovery against all local governmental entities other than counties with the passage in 2005 of HB 2039. The purpose of the bill was to amend chapter

<sup>11</sup> Because TxDOT was raising a no evidence point, the court

was required to affirm the jury’s finding if its review of the record revealed more than a scintilla of evidence to support each element of the joint enterprise finding. *See id.*

271 of the Local Government Code to allow suits for breach of contract against cities, school districts, junior college districts, and special purpose districts. However, the bill also provides that contracts entered into by a local governmental entity is not a joint enterprise for liability purposes. Thus, the bill would seem to exclude local governmental entities from potential liability under the joint enterprise theory of recovery. Interestingly, HB 2039 protects cities, school districts, junior college districts, and special purpose districts from joint enterprise liability, but leaves counties still subject to liability under the Able decision.

#### 7. Section 101.0215: Municipal Liability for Proprietary and Governmental Functions.

Section 101.0215 establishes both what constitutes a proprietary rather than a governmental activity as well as a municipality’s liability for each. Subsection (a) contains a laundry list of governmental functions for which a municipality can be held liable only under the TCA.<sup>12</sup> Generally, entities acting in their governmental capacity are not subject to estoppel. Weatherford v. City of San Marcos, 157 S.W.3d 473 (Tex.App.—Austin 2004, pet. denied). Since the provision is not an independent waiver of governmental immunity, a plaintiff must still establish the applicability of the TCA under some other section (usually section 101.021 or 101.022) before invoking section 101.0215 to establish municipal liability. Bellnoa v. City of Austin, 894 S.W.2d 821, 826 (Tex.App.—Austin 1995, no writ); City of San Antonio v. Winkenhower, 875 S.W.2d 388, 391 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 1994, writ denied).

Subsection (b) provides that the TCA

does not apply to the liability of a municipality for damages arising from its proprietary functions, which are those functions that a municipality may, in its discretion, perform in the interest of the inhabitants of the municipality, including but not limited to: (1) the operation and maintenance of a public utility; (2) amusements owned and operated by the municipality; and (3) any activity that is abnormally dangerous or ultra hazardous.

TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 101.0215(b) (West 2005). Carrying out any function constituting a proprietary activity under subsection (b) means that the municipality enjoys no immunity from suit or liability and there is no limitation upon the amount of damages

the plaintiff can recover. Pontarelli Trust v. City of McAllen, 465 S.W.2d 804, 807–08 (Tex. Civ. App.—Corpus Christi 1971, no writ); Dillard, 806 S.W.2d at 593–94; Pike, 727 S.W.2d at 521. However, any conflict between subsections (a) and (b) regarding whether a given activity is proprietary or governmental is resolved in favor of the finding that it is governmental. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.0215(c). See Gen. Elec. Co. v. City of Abilene, 795 S.W.2d 311, 312–13 (Tex.App.—Eastland 1990, no writ).

The courts look to the nature of the activity and the persons benefited in determining whether a function is governmental or proprietary. The laundry list of governmental functions contained in section 101.0215(a) is not exhaustive. See TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.0215(a). If the activity in question is not on the laundry list, the test of whether it is proprietary is whether it benefits the public-at-large or just persons living within the municipality.

The governmental function of a city has been defined as those acts which are public in nature, and performed by the municipality “as the agent of the state in the furtherance of general law for the interest of the public at large.”

Proprietary functions ... are intended primarily for the benefit of those within the corporate limits of the municipality.

See Gates v. City of Dallas, 704 S.W.2d 737, 738–39 (Tex. 1986).

If some aspects of the activity are governmental and others are proprietary, the City will be held to have engaged in a proprietary function. City of Port Arthur v. Wallace, 171 S.W.2d 480, 481 (Tex. 1943); City of Dallas v. Moreau, 718 S.W.2d 776, 780 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1986, writ ref’d n.r.e.). Moreover, the municipality bears the burden of establishing that the activity in which it was engaged was governmental in nature. See City of Houston v. Bush, 566 S.W.2d 33, 35 (Tex. Civ. App.—Beaumont 1978, writ ref’d n.r.e.); see also City of El Paso v. Morales, 2004 WL 1859912, p. 9 (Tex.App.—El Paso Aug. 20, 2004, pet. denied) (finding question of fact whether city was performing proprietary or governmental function).

The following municipal activities have been found to be proprietary functions, for which the City enjoyed no immunity or limits on its liability:

determination of what is proprietary and governmental is now addressed by this section, but the list of governmental functions has been held to be non-exhaustive. De La Garza v. City of McAllen, 881 S.W.2d 599, 606 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1994), *rev’d on other grounds*, 898 S.W.2d 809 (Tex. 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Prior to the enactment of this section, the determination of what activities were proprietary was left to the courts. See City of San Antonio v. Hamilton, 714 S.W.2d 372, 374–75 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 1986, writ ref’d n.r.e.). The

- (a) Acting as a self insurance plan for provision of health benefits to its employees and their dependents. Gates, 704 S.W.2d at 738;
- (b) Undertaking the management of a firefighters’ retirement fund. Herschbach v. City of Corpus Christi, 883 S.W.2d 720, 730 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1994, pet. denied);
- (c) Operation of a municipal cemetery. Pike, 727 S.W.2d at 519;
- (d) Maintenance of municipal storm sewers. City of Round Rock v. Smith, 687 S.W.2d 300, 302–03 (Tex. 1985);
- (e) Operation of an electric utility. Wheelabrator Air Pollution Control, Inc., v. City of San Antonio, -- S.W.3d --, 59 Tex. Sup. Ct. J. 662 (Tex. 2016); and
- (f) Lease of property owned by municipality. Wasson, 489 S.W.3d 427 (Tex. 2016).
- (g) Discretionary contract intended primarily to raise money for city through revenues generated and increased local taxes. Wasson II, 559 S.W.3d at 151-152.
- (h) Where contract related to a sales tax funded economic grant recited that its purpose was “to promote local economic development and to stimulate business and commercial activity” in Westworth Village and White Settlement through Westworth Village’s sales-tax-funded economic development grant, the court found that it was a contract entered for proprietary purposes and the municipality enjoyed no immunity. City of Westworth Vill. v. City of White Settlement, 558 S.W.3d 232 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth 2018).

As in common law, the determination of whether an activity is a proprietary or governmental function applies only to municipalities. Neither the state, state agencies, school districts nor counties perform any proprietary functions. Wasson, 489 S.W.3d at n. 3; Jezek v. City of Midland, 605 S.W.2d 544 (Tex. 1980); Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Ry. Co. v. Tex. State Dep’t of Highways, 783 S.W.2d 646 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1989, no writ). Accordingly, section 101.0215 has no application to governmental units that are not municipalities.

#### 8. Section 101.022: Liability for Premises Defects.

This section of the paper addresses: (1) whether a claim arises from a premises defect or the condition or use of personal property; and (2) the two standards of liability for premises defects (ordinary premises defects and special defects).

Whether the claim arises from the condition or use of property versus a premises defect is a question of law. Sampson v. Univ. of Texas, 500 S.W.3d at 385.

Moreover, a claim is either a premises claim or for the condition or use of property. *Id.* The liability standard for premises defects claims cannot be reduced by attempting to make it into a condition or use of property claim. *Id.*

#### a. Determining Whether the Suit is Based Upon the “Condition or Use of Property” or a “Premises Defect.”

There are two very different waivers of immunity and standards of liability under the TCA. For claims arising from the “condition or use of property” the standard of liability is the same as the “governmental unit would [face], were it a private person ... according to Texas law.” See Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Ramming, 861 S.W.2d 460, 466 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1993, writ denied). On the other hand, the waiver of immunity and extent of liability are very limited in premise defect cases. See Hawley v. State Dep’t of Highways and Pub. Transp., 830 S.W.2d 278, 281 (Tex.App.—Amarillo 1992, no pet).

Section 101.022 [entitled Duty Owed: Premises and Special Defects] does not purport to create governmental liability but rather to limit the duty owed by the government. Thus, the language of § 101.022 still creates a limitation upon the liability created under § 101.021 and does not, ... create a separate cause of action measured by an ordinary care standard.

Therefore, one of the first issues that should be addressed in analyzing a suit under the TCA is whether claim arises from: (1) the “condition or use of property”; or (2) a “premises” defect.

The courts look to the common definitions of “premises” and “defect” to decide whether or not the case at bar arises from a “premises defect.” Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Henson, 843 S.W.2d 648, 652 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1992, writ denied); Univ. of Tex.-Pan Am. v. Valdez, 869 S.W.2d 446, 448–49 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1993, writ denied); see Davidson, 882 S.W.2d at 86.

The word “premises” is commonly defined as “a building or part of a building with its grounds or other appurtenances.” A legal definition of premises is “land and tenements; an estate including land and buildings their own; ... land and its appurtenances.”

Henson, 843 S.W.2d at 652; see also Davidson, 882 S.W.2d at 85–86; Valdez, 869 S.W.2d at 448–49.

The permanent or temporary status of the object that caused the injury can determine whether it is an “appurtenance,” thus making it part of the “premises.”

Henson, 843 S.W.2d at 652. Following this rationale, the Fourteenth Court of Appeals found that an injury resulting from a barrel sign did not constitute a premises liability claim. Henson’s pickup truck stuck two barrel signs on a state highway. The barrel signs were used as warning devices to demark the edge of traffic lanes and a construction area. Henson was injured when a warning sign panel became detached from the barrel and came through the windshield of his vehicle. The barrel signs were “movable, portable, and temporary in nature, much like construction equipment ... not intended to be a permanent part of the highway.” *Id.* at 653. Based upon these temporary characteristics of the barrel sign, the court concluded that the barrel signs did not constitute part of the premises. Accordingly, the plaintiff’s injury arose from the “condition or use” of property rather than a premises defect.

Other courts of appeals have also followed the temporary versus permanent rationale to find that other claims did not arise from “premises defects.” In Townsend, 548 S.W.2d at 939–40, the plaintiff was injured by a bolt protruding from the turnbuckle of a tennis court net. The bolt was part of the mechanism used to adjust the level of the net. The court held that the bolt and the turnbuckle to which it was attached were not part of the premises. Consequently, the claims did not represent a premises defect claim. *Id.*; see Harris Cnty. v. Dowlearn, 489 S.W.2d 140 (Tex. Civ. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1972, writ ref’d n.r.e.) (unattached wall panel used to divide rooms was not part of premises; injury resulting therefrom is not a premise liability claim); see also Mokry v. Univ. of Tex. Health Sci. Ctr., 529 S.W.2d 802 (Tex. Civ. App.—Dallas 1975, writ ref’d n.r.e.); Lowe, 540 S.W.2d at 297; Robinson, 780 S.W.2d at 169; Ramming, 861 S.W.2d at 460; McGuire, 518 S.W.2d at 528 (injury caused by a hospital bed without side rails).

At the same time, suits that focus on permanent parts of a building or real property are “premises” liability claims. Billstrom arose from injuries to a mental patient injured when he fell to the ground while trying to climb out of a window. Billstrom v. Mem’l Med. Ctr., 598 S.W.2d 642 (Tex.App—Corpus Christi 1980). The plaintiffs complained of the condition of the security screen and the window. The court found the screen and window to be permanent parts of the building and held that the claim arose from a premises defect. As explained by the court of appeals:

Although appellant’s allegations regarding the screen and window concern the condition of tangible property, they are actually “premise defects” within both the generally accepted common and legal definitions of the words. The appellant’s allegations deal with a defect in the appurtenance to a room itself, rather than a defect in a distinct piece of equipment,

irrespective of whether or not that piece of equipment is classified as a fixture. As such, we are of the opinion that appellant’s allegations come within §101.022. The condition of the alleged defective security screen and window are more closely analogous to a defect in a floor or in maintaining a floor in a slippery (defective) condition.

*Id.* at 646–47; see also Tennison, 509 S.W.2d at 561–62 (plaintiff injured as a result of a slick floor was bringing premises liability claims under the TCA, regardless of her claims of how the floor became slick).

Following similar rationale, the Fourteenth Court of Appeals held that injuries caused by a defective elevator door also arose from a premises defect as opposed to the condition or use of property. As explained by the Davidson court:

We find [Billstrom’s] reasoning sound. Despite the fact that an elevator is a separate piece of equipment it is also undeniably an integral part of the building, like a stairwell, floor, or, as in Billstrom, a security screen permanently attached to a window. And, although an elevator can be removed, in truth, it is not a “temporary” installation in any sense; it is a permanent addition to the building. Furthermore, being attached to the building and an integral part of its construction, an elevator is clearly an appurtenance, in fact, more so than the security screen in Billstrom.

882 S.W.2d at 86.

More importantly, the Davidson case seems to imply that when a court is in doubt regarding the proper classification of the instrumentality causing the injury, it should find that the instrumentality was a premises defect. The Fourteenth Court of Appeals states that Billstrom found that the hospital security screen constituted both a piece of tangible property and a permanent part of the hospital premises. *Id.* at 86. The court goes on to explain that Billstrom implicitly holds that because section 101.022(a), the premises liability provision of the TCA, limits the state’s general liability under §101.021(2), liability for the condition or use of property, the Legislature clearly intended the lesser standard of liability to apply when the item at issue can be characterized as a part of the premises. If the Legislature specifically establishes a lessor standard of care for governmental entities in premises cases, any doubt regarding whether something is a premises defect for condition or use of property should be resolved in favor of the former rather than the latter. Therefore, the court suggests that if the instrumentality causing the

injury can be characterized both as a condition of the premises as well as a use of tangible property, the case should be treated as a premises defect claim. No other court has followed this analysis.

(1) The Instrumentality Causing the Injury Rather Than the Means by Which it Became Defective Determines Whether Plaintiff is Bringing a Premises Liability Claim.

Tennison arose from a slip and fall accident in a state building. Tennison, 509 S.W.2d at 560. The plaintiff argued that the negligence standard of liability was applicable because the injury arose out of the active use of the State’s property. Specifically, plaintiff asserted that her cause of action was based upon the negligent use of floor wax, not upon an allegation that the slick floor was a premises defect. Further, she asserted that the premises liability limitation of liability in former § 18(b) (now §101.022) was not applicable because of the active negligence of the State’s agent in creating the dangerous condition by the manner in which it maintained the floor (i.e., the premises). *Id.* at 561–62. The supreme court rejected this, saying that section 18(b) (now §101.022) provides an exception to negligence liability where the claim arises from premise defects. The court reversed and rendered judgment that Tennison take nothing because she failed to get jury findings necessary to support a premises liability claim. *Id.*; Billstrom, 598 S.W.2d at 647–48 (plaintiff injured by a building fixture had a premises liability, not a condition or use claim).

Under the Tennison rationale, a governmental entity, like a private landowner or occupant, may claim the limitations of liability provided by premises liability law. See Tennison, 509 S.W.2d at 561–62. A plaintiff injured by a premises defect on government property is limited to bringing a premises liability claim as provided for in the TCA. A plaintiff may not deprive the government of that limited liability by taking the position that a premises defect is a negligent “use of property” under the TCA.

Once the claim is determined to be a premises defect, the claimant is limited to the provisions delineated by that section and has no right to assert a general “negligent use” theory based on the continued use of the alleged defective property ....

Hawley, 830 S.W.2d at 281.

The Texas Supreme Court revisited this issue in *Simpson v. University of Texas*. Simpson was injured when he tripped over an extension cord across a sidewalk. *Simpson*, 500 S.W.3d at 385. Simpson claimed that the liability was based either on the condition or use of personal property or a negligent activity being conducted on the premises at the time of

the injury. *Id.* The Supreme Court rejected Simpson’s argument. Distinguishing between a claim for the use or condition of tangible personal property as opposed to a premises defect claim depends on whether the activity was the contemporaneous, affirmative action or service (use) or the state of being (condition) of the tangible property itself that caused the injury, as opposed to whether it was a condition created on the real property by the tangible personal property (a premises defect). *Simpson*, 500 S.W.3d at 390. See Shumake, 199 S.W.3d at 284 (explaining that negligent activity claims require that “the claimant’s injury result from [the] contemporaneous activity itself rather than from a condition created on the premises by the activity”); Keetch, 845 S.W.2d at 264 (explaining that a premises defect claim exists when the injury allegedly occurred as a result of a condition created by the activity). “In Aguilar and Hayes, the water hose and metal chain allegedly caused the injuries not because of the inherent nature of the tangible personal property itself or the contemporaneous use of the tangible personal property, but because of the tangible item’s placement—strung, pulled taut—creating a hazardous real-property condition. Aguilar, 251 S.W.3d at 512; Hayes, 327 S.W.3d at 115; cf. Overton Mem. Hosp. v. McGuire, 518 S.W.2d 528, 528–29 (Tex.1975) (per curiam) (characterizing a claim for injuries sustained after a patient fell from a hospital bed without rails as a claim based on condition or use of tangible personal property under the predecessor to the Tort Claims Act—it was the hospital bed itself that allegedly caused an injury and not a dangerous real property condition created by the bed’s placement or position).” *Simpson*, 500 S.W.3d at 390. In *Simpson*, the electrical extension cord was strung across the pedestrian walkway hours before the injury. *Id.* “The dangerous condition was the way the extension cord was positioned over the concrete retaining wall, resulting in a gap between the ground and the cord. The injury did not result from the use of tangible personal property because a UT employee was not putting or bringing the cord into action or service at the time of the injury.” *Id.*

Accordingly, plaintiffs who have prevailed at trial upon a negligence standard have seen their judgments reversed on appeal because their claims arose from a premises defect. See Tennison, 509 S.W.2d at 561–62.

(i) Ordinary Premises Defects.

The TCA establishes a limited duty for governmental units with regard to ordinary premises defects. Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 237. Section 101.022 provides that “the governmental entity owes to the claimant only the duty that a private person owes to a licensee on private property....” TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.022(a); Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Fontenot, 151 S.W.3d 753, 760 (Tex.App.—Beaumont 2004, pet.

denied).<sup>13</sup> The Texas Supreme Court clearly laid out the licensee/licensor standard of care in Tennison.

It is well settled in this state that if a person injured was on the premises as a licensee, the duty that the proprietor or licensor owed him was not to injure him by willful, wanton or gross negligence ... an exception to this general rule is when the licensor has knowledge of a dangerous condition, and the licensee does not, a duty is owed on the part of the licensor to either warn the licensee or make the condition reasonably safe .... [T]he duty to warn licensees of dangerous conditions arises only in those instances where the licensor knows of the condition likely to cause the injury .... Actual knowledge rather than constructive knowledge of the dangerous condition is required.

509 S.W.2d at 562.<sup>14</sup> See also Prairie View A&M v. Brooks, 180 S.W.3d 694 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2005, no pet.) (no evidence the university knew of the dangerous condition); Thompson v. City of Dallas, 167 S.W.3d 571, 575 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2005, pet. filed) rev’d on other grounds, City of Dallas v. Thompson, 210 S.W.3d 601 (Tex.2007), (constructive notice of premises defect does not give rise to a duty to warn a licensee).

Thus, in order to establish liability for an ordinary premises defect, a plaintiff must prove:

(a) The existence of a premises defect.

A premises defect has been held to be something other than a condition normally connected with the use of the premises which creates an unreasonable risk of harm. Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 237; State Dep’t of Highways and Pub. Transp. v. Zachary, 824 S.W.2d 813, 820 (Tex.App.—Beaumont 1992, writ denied); State Dep’t of Highways and Pub. Transp. v. Bacon, 754 S.W.2d 279, 282 (Tex.App.—Texarkana 1988, writ denied). See also Izaguirre, 829 S.W.2d at 160 (holding that ordinary dirt did not represent a dangerous condition, and in the absence of a premises defect, the premises occupier could not be held liable); Seideneck, 451 S.W.2d at 754; Cobb, 965 S.W.2d at 62 (defect means imperfection, shortcoming, or want of something necessary for completion). “Whether a particular set of circumstances creates a ‘dangerous condition’ has been held to present a fact question for the jury.” Blankenship v. Cnty. of Galveston, 775 S.W.2d 439 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1989, no writ).<sup>15</sup>

The Supreme Court’s decision in County of Cameron v. Brown may have a significant effect on what courts have deemed to be premises defects. Part of the problem with the Brown decision is that the case came to the Supreme Court from the trial court’s granting of the defendants’ pleas to the jurisdiction. Cnty. of Cameron v. Brown, 80 S.W.3d 549, 552 (Tex. 2002). The suit arose from an accident on the Queen Isabella Causeway in a section of the causeway where the overhead lighting had gone out. *Id.* The court found that, under the allegations and evidence presented, a “malfunctioning block of artificial lighting that the defendants to maintain causing a sudden and unexpected change in driving conditions” could constitute a dangerous condition. *Id.* at 557. Those allegations and

<sup>13</sup> An exception to this rule exists where the injured party has paid for the use of the premises. In that case, the governmental entity owes the same duty as that owed to an invitee. TCA § 101.022(a). Tex. Parks and Wildlife Dep’t, 988 S.W.2d at 372–74; M.D. Anderson Hosp. v. Felter, 837 S.W.2d 245, 247–48 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1992, no pet.). The mere payment of a fee related to the premises does not establish that the plaintiff has paid for the use of the premises. The “payment” must be “for the use” of the premises at issue in the litigation. Kitchen, 867 S.W.2d at 786–87. Thus, in Kitchen, the supreme court held that the payment of vehicle registration and licensing fees did not constitute payment for the use of a state highway. *Id.*; Garcia v. State, 817 S.W.2d 741 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 1991, writ denied). Garcia holds that the payment of fuel taxes was not a payment for the use of the roadway. *Id.*; see also Brazoria County v. Davenport, 780 S.W.2d 827, 828 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1989, no writ) (plaintiff who did not pay for care at prenatal clinic was licensee on premises). Under Kitchen, only the payment of a toll for the use of toll roads could create a situation where the plaintiff will be considered

as having paid for the use of the particular roadway. Additionally, the payment of state, county, or city taxes will not mean that a plaintiff has paid for the use of a particular government building or property. Only a fee charged for entry onto a particular premises, such as the purchase of a ticket to get into a zoo, museum, gallery, concert hall, or theater, will mean that the plaintiff must be considered as an invitee under §101.022(a). See *id.*; Tex. Parks and Wildlife Dep’t, 988 S.W.2d at 372–74.

<sup>14</sup> One court of appeals has held that governmental entities owe a lower standard of care to independent contractors. Durbin v. Culberson County, 132 S.W.3d 650 (Tex.App.—El Paso 2004, no pet. h.).

<sup>15</sup> The Texas Pattern Jury Charge (“TJC”), Volume 3, Section 66.05, states that the condition must create an unreasonable risk that results in physical harm, before liability can be imposed upon the occupier of the premises. The TJC does not indicate whether this issue should be presented to the jury in the form of an instruction or a separate question.

that evidence included the following: the plaintiff had alleged the accident was caused in part by the lights on the causeway going out, an agent for one defendant had found there was a problem with the lights going out and that this represented a risk to drivers on the causeway, the causeway had curves, the causeway’s shoulders were narrow, and once a motorist entered the causeway they were prohibited from turning around. Thus, the court reversed the granting of the plea to the jurisdiction and remanded the case to the trial court. *Id.*

Without consideration of the fact that the court was examining the case to determine whether the plaintiff’s pleadings and evidence were sufficient to survive a plea to the jurisdiction, some will argue that the Supreme Court has held that when artificial lights go out on roadways with narrow shoulders a dangerous condition has been created. *Id.* at 561 (Jefferson, J., concurring), *id.* at 563 (Hecht, J., dissenting). The holding in Brown should not be overstated. The issue before the court was merely whether the plaintiff’s pleadings and evidence were sufficient to survive a plea to the jurisdiction. See also Perches, 388 S.W.3d at 656 (plaintiff’s pleadings as a matter of law were insufficient to allege a claim for an ordinary premises defect).

(b) The licensor must have knowledge of the condition and that it is unreasonably dangerous at the time of the injury.

The Tennison decision clearly holds that before liability can attach, a governmental unit must have knowledge of the dangerous condition. Tennison, 509 S.W.2d at 562; York II, 284 S.W.3d at 847–48; Kitchen, 867 S.W.2d at 786; Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 237.

Actual knowledge “requires knowledge that the dangerous condition existed at the time of the accident, as opposed to constructive knowledge which can be established by facts or inferences that a dangerous condition could develop over time.” City of Corsicana v. Stewart, 249 S.W.3d 412 (Tex. 2008); Reyes v. City of Laredo, 335 S.W.3d 605, 608–09 (Tex. 2010); Univ. of Tex. v. Hayes, 327 S.W.3d 113, 117 (Tex. 2010); City of Dallas v. Reed, 258 SW3d 620, 623 (Tex. 2003). The fact that the governmental entity did work on the premises does not mean it had knowledge of a condition that a premises defect would subsequently develop as a result of the work. City of Denton v. Paper, 376 S.W.3d 762, 766–67 (Tex. 2012). In Paper, City had done work on the street a week before the accident and at the conclusion of the work there was no pothole or depression in the street and the condition of the street “was no hazardous.” *Id.* at 767. There was no evidence the city had received complaints of the pothole. *Id.* Accordingly, the city’s knowledge that it had done work on the street and that a pothole might develop as a result of the work was insufficient to establish that the city has actual knowledge of the premises defect. *Id.*

Actual, rather than constructive, knowledge is required. Reyes, 335 S.W.3d at 608–09 (testimony that a man living near the flooded road called 911 four or five times about rising water stating there was going to be a problem with cars getting swept away proved that the City knew that, at some time, there was going to be a problem, but was insufficient to establish knowledge of the condition at the time of the accident that occurred several hours later); Fontenot, 151 S.W.3d at 764 (witness testimony that “everybody knew” insufficient to prove actual knowledge); Kitchen, 867 S.W.2d at 786; Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 237; Brooks, 180 S.W.3d at 696; Thompson, 167 S.W.3d at 575. But see Tex. Tech. Med. Ctr. v. Garcia, 190 S.W.3d 774 (Tex.App.—El Paso 2006 no pet.) (allegations defendant knew of dangerous condition and failed to warn of condition, plead sufficient facts to state premises claim). In determining in whether a premises owner has actual knowledge, “courts generally consider whether the premises owner has received reports of prior injuries or reports of the potential danger presented by the condition. Reed, 258 S.W.3d at 623, Univ. of Tex.—Pan Am. v. Aguilar, 251 S.W.3d 511 (Tex. 2008).

However, the Texas Supreme Court has set a very high standard for when circumstantial evidence can establish a government entity’s actual knowledge of a dangerous condition. As explained by the Texas Supreme Court in City of Corsicana v. Stewart, 249 SW3d 412, 414 (Tex. 2008) (per curiam): “Here the Legislature required that the city actually know that the crossing was flooded at the time of the accident. ... Circumstantial evidence establishes actual knowledge only when it ‘either directly or by reasonable inference’ supports that conclusion.” *Id.*; State v. Gonzalez, 82 S.W.3d 322, 330 (Tex. 2002). The Stewart decision arose from two children drowning in a car that was swept away by flood waters after it stalled at a low-water crossing. Stewart, 249 S.W.3d at 414. In Stewart, in support of its plea to the jurisdiction, the city submitted the affidavit of its Director of Public Works in which he stated that the city first became aware of the flooded road crossing when the decedent’s father called 911 asking for help. The Court noted that this testimony established that the city had actual knowledge of the flood waters at the crossing only after the car in which the children were left had become stuck in the flood waters. *Id.* at 415. The Supreme Court noted that the Plaintiffs offered substantial circumstantial evidence that the City had actual notice of the flood waters at the crossing. *Id.* The plaintiffs offered testimony including: (1) testimony from the Public Works Director that the crossing had flooded in the past and the city had closed the crossing on several previous occasions due to flooding; (2) A study commissioned by the city identifying the crossing as vulnerable to future flooding; (3) Testimony from a former city council member that she told city personnel of dangerous conditions at the



crossing during light and heavy rain; (4) Four severe weather warnings issued by the National Weather Service on the afternoon and evening proceeding the accident; (5) Evidence that TxDOT closed a road one mile upstream from the crossing, several hours before the accident due to flooding; and (6) Testimony from the responding officer that he had assisted another officer in the area and was aware of heavy rainfall in the proximity of the crossing. The Supreme Court found that the circumstantial evidence was not sufficient to establish actual knowledge in face of affidavit from the city public works director, stating that the city did not have actual knowledge. *Id.*; see also Reyes, 335 S.W.3d at 608–09 (four or five calls to 911 in advance of the accident from a man living near the flooded intersection, stating that flood waters were rising and there was going to be a problem with cars getting swept away was not sufficient to establish the City’s knowledge).

The Texas Supreme Court contrasted the circumstantial evidence offered by the Stewart’s with the circumstantial evidence offered in City of San Antonio v. Rodriguez, 931 SW 2d 535, 537 (Tex. 1996). Rodriguez involved a suit arising from injuries suffered as a result of a fall on a wet basement basketball court. The evidence in the case showed that the city knew that the rain dripped through and fell on the gym floor because of leaks in the roof of the recreation center. *Id.* In Rodriguez, a city employee also had contemporaneous knowledge of water on the floor elsewhere in the recreation center as a result of leaks. *Id.* The clear lesson of the Stewart decision, is that it will be very difficult to establish a governmental entity has actual knowledge of a dangerous condition through circumstantial evidence, especially where a governmental entity offers testimony that it did not have actual knowledge at the time of the accident. Stewart, 249 SW3d 412, 414; see also State v. Gonzalez, 82 S.W.3d 322, 330 (Tex. 2002) (evidence that defendant was aware of repeated vandalism/removal of a sign, did not establish that defendant knew sign was missing where there was no evidence someone had reported the sign missing on the day of the accident).

Thus, the Supreme Court has held that “actual knowledge requires the [governmental entity] to know ‘that the dangerous condition existed at the time of the accident, not merely of the possibility that a dangerous condition could develop over time.’” Hayes, 327 S.W.3d at 117 (quoting City of Corsicana, 249 S.W.3d at 414–15). “Awareness of a potential problem is not actual knowledge of an existing danger. Had there been testimony that a 911 operator received a credible report at about the time of the accident that the crossing had actually flooded and was imperiling motorists, there would have been evidence the City had actual knowledge of a dangerous condition.” Reyes, 335 S.W.3d at 609.

Furthermore, the licensor must not only prove the entity’s actual knowledge of the existence of the condition at the time of the accident, but must also prove that the entity knew that the defect is likely to cause injury. *Id.*; City of Dallas v. Reed, 258 S.W.3d at 622 (defendant must have actual knowledge of the danger presented by the condition); Keetch, 845 S.W.2d at 265, 267; Tennison, 509 S.W.2d at 561–62. See also Barker v. City of Galveston, 907 S.W.2d 879, 885–87 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1995, writ denied) (where only one person was ever reported injured by the swing set, and swing sets were regularly inspected, knowledge of condition that caused injury was not knowledge defect was likely to cause injury; while plaintiff’s evidence might raise jury issue on constructive knowledge, it failed as a matter of law on issue of actual notice); Hastings v. De Leon, 532 S.W.2d 147, 149 (Tex. Civ. App.—San Antonio 1975, writ ref’d n.r.e.) (licensee who slipped and fell on a throw rug inside host’s home could not recover, absent proof the licensor knew, prior to the fall, that the rug created a “dangerous condition”). In Reyes, the Supreme Court held that the University of Texas did not know the alleged premised defect, a chain across a campus roadway that plaintiff ran into on his bicycle, was dangerous. 335 S.W.3d at 609. The court pointed out that the University “had no reason to know that the chain was dangerous to a user of the road ... because it had closed the roadway to road users.” *Id.* In the City of Dallas v. Reed, the plea to the jurisdiction was granted because, while the plaintiff established the city knew of the premises condition, he did not prove the city knew the condition presented a potential danger to motorists. But see Harris Cnty. v. Eaton, 573 S.W.2d 177, 178–79 (Tex. 1978) (when condition is a special defect county held liable because it should have discovered the pot holes and known they presented an unreasonable risk of harm to drivers).

(c) The plaintiff did not have knowledge of the dangerous condition.

If the licensee knows of the dangerous condition, the governmental occupier of the property owes no duty to him. Payne v. City of Galveston, 772 S.W.2d 473 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1989, writ denied) (“Payne II”); York II, 284 S.W.3d at 847–48. The plaintiff must not only prove, but also obtain a finding of lack of knowledge of the dangerous condition on his part in order to establish liability. Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 237. The courts of appeals are split on whether constructive knowledge of the dangerous condition will defeat the licensee’s suit. “A licensee is imputed with knowledge of those conditions perceivable to him, or the existence of which can be inferred from the facts within his present or past knowledge.” Weaver, 750 S.W.2d at 26. Weaver was walking across a Kentucky Fried Chicken parking lot when he slipped and fell on some

cooking grease. The color of the grease was in stark contrast with the surface of the parking lot, making the grease “open and obvious.” “While the evidence does not establish actual knowledge, it does establish that the hazard was easily perceivable. We hold that this is enough to relieve KFC of the duty to warn.” *Id.* at 27. See Kitchen, 867 S.W.2d at 786; City of San Benito v. Cantu, 831 S.W.2d 416, 425 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1992, no writ). But see McKinney, 886 S.W.2d at 303–04 (court presumed absence of knowledge by the licensee); Bacon, 754 S.W.2d at 281 (licensee must establish absence of actual knowledge of dangerous condition, not absence of constructive knowledge).

- (d) The governmental unit failed to both warn of the dangerous condition and to make the condition reasonably safe.

When a governmental entity either warns of the dangerous condition or makes the dangerous condition reasonably safe, it has fully discharged its obligations to the licensee and cannot be held liable. Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Guerra, 858 S.W.2d 44, 46–47 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1993, writ denied); Smith v. State, 716 S.W.2d 177, 179 (Tex.App.—El Paso 1986, writ ref’d n.r.e.).<sup>16</sup>

- (e) The failure to warn was a proximate cause of the injury.

Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 237; Barron v. Tex. Dep’t of Transp., 880 S.W.2d 300, 303–04 (Tex.App.—Waco 1994, writ denied); Keetch, 845 S.W.2d at 264; Corbin, 648 S.W.2d at 296. See also Tex. S. Univ. v. Mouton, 541 S.W.3d 908, 915 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2018, no pet.) (no proximate cause for failure to warn or make safe during threat of active shooter on campus).

The majority of licensor/licensee cases are tried under the dangerous condition theory laid out above. A licensor, however, also has a duty not to injure a licensee willfully, wantonly, or through gross negligence. Therefore, liability of a governmental entity/licensor may be predicated upon gross negligence in allowing

the condition to exist. Davenport, 780 S.W.2d at 827. In Davenport, the county’s actions were held to constitute gross negligence where he allowed a slippery condition on a sidewalk at the entrance of a prenatal clinic to develop from an accumulation of water, mud, and slime coming from a water line where the county had been aware of the condition for some time. *Id.*; see also City of Houston v. Cavazos, 811 S.W.2d 231, 233 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1991, writ dismissed).

Due to the difficulty of establishing all of the elements of a licensee dangerous condition suit, more and more governmental premises liability cases are being tried under a gross negligence theory. See Graf v. Harris, 877 S.W.2d 82 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1994, writ denied); Horrocks, 841 S.W.2d at 415.

- (ii) Special Defects.

The TCA provides that under certain circumstances, a governmental defendant has a greater duty than a licensor owes to a licensee. One of the instances in which a greater duty is owed is when the premises defect involved constitutes a “special defect.” TCA § 101.022.<sup>17</sup>

Most property defects are ordinary premises defects not special defects. Hayes, 327 S.W.3d at 116; Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 238; Horrocks, 841 S.W.2d at 416. Thus, a special defect is the exception and not the rule. Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 238. “The class of special defects contemplated by the statute is narrow. It does not include common potholes or similar depressions in the roadway. ... Such irregularities in the roadway unfortunately are to be expected.” City of Denton v. Paper, 376 S.W.3d 762, 764 (Tex. 2012) (internal quotations and citations omitted).

A special defect need not have been created by the governmental unit itself. Eaton, 573 S.W.2d at 179 (a “special defect” need not have been created by the government itself, but could conceivably result from a natural occurrence such as an obstruction created by an avalanche or from the act of a third party); Horrocks, 841 S.W.2d at 416–17.

El Paso 1987, writ denied). For example, a stop sign has been held to constitute adequate warning of the danger of cross traffic on an intersecting road. Plaintiff “had a duty by statute to remain stopped at the stop sign until she could enter the intersection in question with safety.” Whether the warning provides adequate notice of the dangerous condition should be a question of fact for the jury. See Guerra, 858 S.W.2d at 45–47. But see Maxwell v. Tex. Dep’t of Transp., 880 S.W.2d 461, 465 (Tex.App.—Austin 1994, pet. denied) (holding that “type 2” marker consisting of post with three amber reflectors was sufficient warning of culvert adjacent to roadway).

<sup>16</sup> The duty to warn of a dangerous condition is to adequately warn. The warning must provide adequate notice of the condition the licensee will encounter. State v. McBride, 601 S.W.2d 552, 557 (Tex. Civ. Ann.—Waco 1980, writ ref’d n.r.e.). The premises defect in McBride was a section of roadway under construction that was so slick that cars traveling at about 15 miles per hour would lose control as they drove through the construction area. The state had posted “Slow” and “35 MPH” signs. The Waco court held that these signs were insufficient to provide an adequate warning. *Id.* at 557.

On the other hand, a sign is not required to spell out the particular danger, but merely give sufficient information to put the plaintiff on notice of the danger she may encounter. Shives v. State of Texas, 743 S.W.2d 714, 717 (Tex.App.—

<sup>17</sup> The duty and limitations on the obligation to install, maintain, and repair traffic control devices is discussed in section II(C)(4).

The Supreme Court’s decisions establish five principles to consider in determining whether a condition on the premises constitutes a special defect. Hayes, 327 S.W.3d at 116. As the Texas Supreme Court explained in Paper,

[A]s we have said, “the central inquiry is whether the condition is of the same kind or falls within the same class as an excavation or obstruction.” York, 284 S.W.3d at 847 (citing Cnty of Harris v. Eaton, 573 S.W.2d 177, 179 (Tex. 1978)). In determining whether a particular condition is like an excavation or obstruction and therefore a special defect, we have mentioned several helpful characteristics, such as: (1) the size of the condition; (2) whether the condition unexpectedly and physically impairs an ordinary user’s ability to travel on the road; (3) whether the condition presents some unusual quality apart from the ordinary course of events; and (4) whether the condition presents an unexpected and unusual danger. The Univ. of Tex. at Austin v. Hayes, 327 S.W.3d 113, 116 (Tex. 2010) (per curiam) (citing York, 327 S.W.3d at 847).

376 S.W.3d at 765

A special defect must be a condition that can be categorized as similar to an excavation or obstruction.

“The [Act] does not define ‘special defect’ but does give guidance by likening special defects to ‘excavations or obstructions. Thus,... we are to construe ‘special defect’ to include those defects of the same kind or class as excavations and obstructions. While these specific examples are not exclusive and do not exhaust the category, the central inquiry is whether the condition is of the same kind or falls within the same class as an excavation or obstruction. ... A special defect, then, cannot be a condition that falls outside of this class. To the extent courts classify as ‘special’ a defect that is not like an excavation or obstruction on a roadway, we disapprove of them.”

York II, 284 S.W.3d at 847 (internal citations and quotations omitted; City of Grapevine v. Roberts, 946 S.W.2d 841, 843 (Tex. 1997) (per curiam). Thus, loose gravel is not a special defect because it “does not form a hole in the road or physically block the road like an obstruction or excavation. York II, 284 S.W.3d at 847. Similarly, “construing a partially cracked and crumbling sidewalk step to be an excavation or obstruction grossly strains the definitions of those conditions. Roberts, 946

S.W.2d at 843. “A guardrail on a highway does impede travel or otherwise ‘block’ the road for an ordinary user in the normal course of travel, but rather, in accordance with its intended purpose, delineates the roadway’s bounds”, and thus was not a special defect. Perches, 388 S.W.3d at 656. Unless the condition constitutes an excavation or obstruction that impedes travel on the roadway, then it does not constitute a special defect under the Act. Denton Cnty. v. Beynon, 283 S.W.3d 329 (Tex. 2009)\*. Special defects unexpectedly and physically impede or impair a car’s ability to travel on the road. at 331; State v. Rodriguez, 985 S.W.2d 83, 86 (Tex. 1999). See also Eaton, 573 S.W.2d at 178–79 (“chughole” that varied from six to ten inches in depth and extended over ninety percent of the width of the highway was a special defect); Hindman v. State Dep’t of Highways, 906 S.W.2d 43 (Tex.App.—Tyler 1994, writ denied); Morse v. State, 905 S.W.2d 470, 475 (Tex.App.—Beaumont 1995, writ denied); Zachary, 824 S.W.2d at 819. Thus the condition must be one that cannot be avoided as the plaintiff’s travels down the roadway. Paper, 376 S.W.3d at 766. For example the hole in the roadway in Eaton covered 90% of the roadway and varied from six to ten inches in depth and was four to nine-feet wide. Eaton, 573 S.W.2d at 178. The Supreme Court described the condition as reaching “the proportion s of a ditch across the highway.” *Id.* at 179. By stark contrast the pothole in Paper was two inches to several more inches deep, located near the center of the lane; but could have easily been avoided by the plaintiff bicyclist without entering into the other lane of traffic. 376 S.W.3d at 765–67.

The defect must “present an unexpected and unusual danger to ordinary users of roadways.” Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 238–39. The Supreme Court uses an Objective Expectations test for determining if a premises condition represents an unexpected and unusual danger to ordinary users of roadways. Denton County, 283 S.W.3d at 331. Where the premises condition would be encountered only where the driver went careening uncontrollably off the road, then that is not a special defect. Perches, 388 S.W.3d at 656 (“A guardrail ... does impede ... the road for an ordinary user in the normal course of travel, but rather ... delineates the roadway’s bounds”); Denton County, 283 S.W.3d 329, 332 (a floodgate arm that was three feet from the travel lanes of the road but was only encountered because the driver left the road and was out of control was not a special defect); City of Dallas v. Reed, 258 SW3d at 522 (there is nothing usually dangerous about a slight (two inch) drop-off between traffic lanes on a road). See also Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 238-39 (end of culvert located 22 feet from the edge of the road surface did not represent danger to the ordinary users of the roadway); Kitchen, 867 S.W.2d at 786 (“[w]hen there is precipitation accompanied by near-freezing temperatures ... an icy bridge is neither

unexpected nor unusual”). However, an edge drop-off on the edge of the paved surface of the road was an unexpected danger to ordinary users of the roadway when the driver was using the shoulder to go around a stopped vehicle. Tex. DOT v. Ramirez, 566 S.W.3d 18 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 2018)(pet. filed).

In order to be found to be a special defect the premises condition must be on or in very close proximity to a highway, road, or street. Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 238-39, n.3 (“conditions threatening normal users of a road may be special defects even though they do not occur on the surface of a road”); Barker, 907 S.W.2d at 885. “Our special-defect jurisprudence turns on the objective expectations of an ‘ordinary user’ who follows the ‘normal course of travel.’ In Beynon, the motorist struck a floodgate arm that was three feet off the roadway after the motorist lost control of his car. We held that an ‘ordinary user’ would not have left the roadway in this manner, and that the ‘normal course of travel’ would be on the actual road. Similarly, here, [plaintiff] did not take the normal course of travel. Road users in the normal course of travel should turn back or take an alternate route when a barricade is erected to alert them of a closed roadway.” Hayes, 327 S.W.3d at 116 (quoting Denton County v. Beynon, 283 S.W.3d 329, 332 (Tex. 2009)). While many cases refer to conditions actually located on a roadway as special defects, some courts have held that a defect located close enough to road to present a threat to ordinary users of the roadway can be a special defect. See Taylor v. Wood County, 133 S.W.3d 811, 813 (Tex.App.—Texarkana 2004, no pet.); Harris County v. Ciccio, 125 S.W.3d, 749 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2003, pet. denied)(a culvert yards beyond the road’s end where a right turn only land directed traffic was held to be a special defect). As reasoned by the dissenting Justices in the Denton County opinion, “‘ordinary users’ of roads sometimes stray outside the lines, where there would be no need for shoulders. ... [I]t is certainly not inconceivable that a normal user of a road might pull off or leave the edge of a road onto the unimproved shoulder for one reason or another, either intentionally or accidentally. In the ordinary course of driving, hazards like road debris, livestock and other drivers who don’t respect their lanes are often encountered that require prudent drivers to take advantage of the shoulder, where improved or unimproved.” Denton County, 283 S.W.3d 329, 335 (J. O’Neill, Dissenting).

While these rules may assist in determining whether something is a special defect, the ultimate decision is made on a case by case basis. Set forth below are lists of premises conditions that have been found to be special defects, and other examples that have been found not to be special defects.

#### Premises Conditions That Have Been Found to be Special Defects.

- (a) An oval shaped hole varying from six to ten inches deep and extending over ninety percent of the width of the highway, four feet wide at some points and nine feet wide at others, with the deepest part astride the center stripe, so big that one could not stay on the pavement and miss it, which had reached the proportions of a ditch across the highway and so severe that it made a car going 35 miles per hour flip and turn upside down in a bar ditch is a special defect. Eaton, 573 S.W.2d at 178-79; Wood County, 133 S.W.3d at 813 (collapsed culvert which ran across a road and was 6-8 feet wide and 4-6 feet deep was a special defect); Durham v. Bowie County, 135 S.W.3d 294, 297-98 (Tex.App.—Texarkana 2004, pet. denied); Stambaugh v. City of White Oak, 894 S.W.2d 818 (Tex.App.—Tyler 1994, no writ) (holding that collapsed portion of roadway fifteen feet wide and ten feet long was special defect).
- (b) In a paved highway, a slick, muddy excavation that was so severe that a car going over it at about 15 miles per hour would slide and a car traveling at less than 35 miles per hour went out of control, off the road and turned over, is a “special defect.” McBride, 601 S.W.2d at 552; City of San Antonio v. Schneider, 787 S.W.2d 459, 466-68 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 1990, writ denied) (wet, slippery road).
- (c) A roadway with right-turn-only markings leading into a short road that ended in a culvert where there was no warning or indication of the culvert in the absence of roadway lighting at night was a special defect. Harris County v. Estate of Ciccio, 125 S.W.3d 749 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2003, pet. denied). There was no indication that the road simply ended, and no lighting by which to see this at night. While the sudden ending of the road onto which traffic was directed could simply have been a nuisance if a car had become mired in unpaved earth, the culvert located just beyond the end of road presented an unusual and unexpected danger to ordinary users of the designated right turn lane. ... *Id.*
- (d) In the virtual absence of artificial lighting, a ditch four feet from the edge of road surface and adjacent to a street forming a “T” at which another street dead ended was a “special defect.” City of Houston v. Jean, 517 S.W.2d 596, 599 (Tex. Civ. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1974, writ ref’d n.r.e.).

- (e) An opening in brush alongside a road, although appearing to be an intersecting road, was actually only an opening into a deep arroyo parallel to the road is a “special defect” according to dicta in Chappell v. Dwyer, 611 S.W.2d 158 (Tex.App.—El Paso 1981, no writ). The opening had been protected by a barrier in the past, but it had not been maintained and was not there at the time of the accident.
- (f) A traffic signal base, which extended twenty-six inches above the travel portion of highway, was a special defect. Andres v. City of Dallas, 580 S.W.2d 908, 909-11 (Tex. Civ. App.—Eastland 1979, no writ).
- (g) A large metal sign lying face down on lane of road is a special defect as a matter of law. State of Tex. v. Williams, 932 S.W.2d 546 (Tex.App.—Tyler 1995, writ denied) (with per curiam opinion).
- (h) Ten-inch drop off along shoulder of road that prevented car’s tire from re-entering the roadway was a special defect. State v. Rodriguez, 985 S.W.2d at 86; Morse, 905 S.W.2d at 475. See Tex.Dep’t of Transp. v. Lopez, 436 S.W.3d 95, 105 (Tex.App.—Eastland 2015) reh’g overruled (Aug. 14, 2014), review denied (Nov. 7, 2014) (summary judgment evidence raised fact question whether edge drop off was a special defect.).
- (i) An 11-inch opening in a sidewalk caused by a missing meter box cover that was 20 feet from the curb and 2 feet from a building was a special defect. City of Austin v. Rangel, 184 S.W.3d 377, 384 (Tex.App.—Austin 2006, no pet. hist.). See City of El Paso v. Chacon, 148 S.W.3d 417, 422-23 (Tex.App.—El Paso, pet. denied) (because pedestrians walking up the street had to walk on the sidewalk, a condition on sidewalk could be a special defect.) But see City of El Paso v. Bernal, 986 S.W.2d 610 (Tex. 1999) (hole on sidewalk was an ordinary defect not a special defect).
- (j) An 8 3/4 inch drop-off at the edge of the paved shoulder, causing the tire to pop and the tractor-trailer to tip over on its side was a special defect. Court considered that the TxDOT manual instructed that three inches was the maximum depth at which a drop-off was acceptable.
- (k) A road unexpectedly and abruptly ending in a canal and concrete barrier constituted a special defect, as it was both an excavation and obstruction in roadway.

*City of El Paso v. Lopez*, 594 S.W.3d 715, 721 (Tex. App.—El Paso 2019, no pet.).

Premises Conditions That Have  
Been Found **Not** to be Special Defects.

- (a) Storm flooded road was not a special defect because it was not unexpected or unusual in times of heavy rains. Reyes, 335 S.W.3d at 608. Flood water two feet deep across a highway is an obstruction constituting a “special defect.” But see Miranda v. State, 591 S.W.2d 568 (Tex.App.—El Paso 1979, no writ)(water flooding roadway as a special defect); Zachary, 824 S.W.2d at 818 (likewise, standing water extending from the curb to the middle of the two eastbound lanes of traffic, when the right lane was completely covered with a large amount of water that was at least three inches deep and at least to the top of the curb and out just past the center lane of the left lane, was a special defect).
- (b) Confusing striping caused by old stripes showing through the worn pavement surface of a detour are not anything like a roadway obstruction or excavation and are not a “special defect.” Carson, 599 S.W.2d at 854-55.
- (c) A defective screen that allowed a mental patient to escape from a hospital was not a “special defect.” Billstrom, 598 S.W.2d at 646-47.
- (d) The Galveston Seawall is not a “special defect,” it is “a unique condition designed to protect the public from dangers of storm water.” Payne II, 772 S.W.2d at 473. Even slippery wet algae growth on rocks at the base of stairs descending the Galveston Seawall, causing plaintiff to slip and fall, was not a special defect. Blankenship, 775 S.W.2d at 439.
- (e) A median cut on a city street creating a dangerous and confusing condition allowing a driver to enter the exit ramp traveling in the wrong direction is not a “special defect,” because it was a long standing condition. Villarreal v. State Dep’t of Highways and Pub. Transp., 810 S.W.2d 419, 421 (Tex.App.—Dallas 1991, writ denied). A long standing condition cannot constitute an unexpected or unusual condition on the roadway. *Id.* During bad weather, the temporary presence of four inches of water on the highway was not a special defect as a matter of law. Fontenot, 151 S.W.3d at 753.
- (f) Dicta in Zachary states that water on a roadway is not a special defect unless it covers

more than half of all the lanes of traffic. The defendant argued that the water did not constitute a special defect as a matter of law. Specifically, the State’s brief claimed: “The evidence showed that the water did not cover the entirety of one lane much less two” and “[t]he evidence in this case is that water either partially or totally covered only one lane of a two lane, single directional roadway.” Zachary, 824 S.W.2d at 819. In response to these assertions, the Fourteenth Court of Appeals concluded:

[I]f either of appellant’s statements constituted the entirety of the evidence in this case, we would be tempted to agree with appellant that, as a matter of law, no evidence of ‘special defect’ existed. *Id.*

- (g) The leaf spring from a truck, measuring three inches wide, nine inches long, and less than a quarter inch thick, located off the road surface on the shoulder is not a special defect. Horrocks, 841 S.W.2d at 417.
- (h) When there is precipitation accompanied by near-freezing temperatures, an icy bridge is not a special defect. Kitchen, 867 S.W.2d at 786. Under the circumstances, ice on the bridge was not unexpected or unusual. *Id.*
- (i) Cars legally parked on the street are not special defects. Palmer v. City of Benbrook, 607 S.W.2d 295, 300 (Tex. Civ. App.—Fort Worth 1980, writ ref’d n.r.e.).
- (j) Depression in a highway where asphalt sunk below abutting concrete bridge was not a special defect. Sutton v. State Highway Dep’t, 549 S.W.2d 59, 60-61 (Tex. Civ. App.—Waco 1977, writ ref’d n.r.e.).
- (k) Reservoir located at the edge of a city park was not a special defect because “danger is open and obvious and observable to anyone.” Cantu, 831 S.W.2d at 421.
- (l) A fully operational motor vehicle making an illegal movement or momentarily stopped on a highway is neither a defect in the highway premises, nor an excavation or obstruction or similar condition. State v. Burris, 877 S.W.2d 298 (Tex. 1994). See Barron, 880 S.W.2d at 303 (stalled car on bridge did not constitute a special defect).
- (m) A culvert located twenty-two feet from the edge of the highway was not a special defect because it would not be encountered by ordinary users of the highway. Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 238-39; Maxwell, 880 S.W.2d at 465 (in reaching their decision, the Austin Court of Appeals cited evidence that the

culvert had been in place since the 1950’s and that there had been no reported accidents at the site).

- (n) An irregular oval shaped bump that was two-and-a-half-inches high and occupied the center of a shoulder ten feet wide with sufficient space for a bicycle to travel on either side of the bump was not a special defect, even for cyclists traveling on the shoulder of the road. Hindman, 906 S.W.2d at 45-46.
- (o) Detour along frontage road that eventually led to a ninety degree turn was not a special defect as it was not an excavation or obstruction and did not impair a vehicle’s ability to travel along the roadway. State v. Rodriguez, 985 S.W.2d at 86.
- (p) The absence of a turn lane or safety devices is not a special defect—it is a “condition that is longstanding, routine, or permanent.” Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Phillips, 153 S.W.3d 121, 123 (Tex.App.—Beaumont 2004, no pet.).
- (q) “Open and obvious” drainage block that plaintiff hit while riding her bicycle was not objectively unexpected and thus, not a special defect. City of Galveston v. Albright, 2004 WL 2439231 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2004, no pet.).
- (r) Embankment at end of extension was not a special defect because it was not a condition encountered by normal users of the roadway. Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Andrews, 155 S.W.3d 351 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 2005, pet. denied).
- (s) Assuming a hole or gap in curb could be a special defect, 12-18 inch hole or gap in the curb did not constitute a special defect. Porter v. Grayson County, Tex., 224 S.W.3d 855 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2007, no pet.).
- (t) Two to three inch change in height between lanes of roadway is not a special defect. City of Dallas v. Reed, 258 SW3d at 622. A pothole that was two inches to four inches in depth that could be easily avoided by the plaintiff bicyclist without going into the opposing land of traffic was not a special defect. Paper, 376 S.W.3d at 765-67.
- (u) Half to three-quarters of an inch of gravel was not a special defect because it was not similar to an excavation or obstruction and did not present an unexpected or unusual danger to ordinary users of a roadway. York II, 284 S.W.3d at 847-48. “[W]e hold today... loose gravel... does not form a hole in the road or physically block the road like an obstruction or excavation.” Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Gutierrez, 284 S.W.3d 848 (Tex. 2009). However, the York II decision does suggest,

in dicta, that “a sizeable mound of gravel left on a roadway could constitute a special defect. York II, 284 S.W.3d at 847-48.

- (v) A seventeen-foot floodgate arm located approximately three feet off a two-lane road that was not properly secured and was pointing toward on-coming traffic was not a special defect where the driver struck the arm only because he lost control of his car and went off the road. Denton County, 283 S.W.3d 329, 332.
- (w) A ninety-degree turn in a detour from a road construction project was not a special defect. Rodriguez, 985 S.W.2d at 86. See York II, 284 S.W.3d at 847-48.
- (x) A bulldozer parked eight to ten feet off the edge of the road was not a special defect because it was not comparable to an excavation or obstruction and did not pose a threat to ordinary users of the roadway. City of Dallas v. Giraldo, 262 S.W.3d 864, 871 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2008, no pet).
- (y) A guardrail is intended to mark the bounds of a roadway and thus as matter of law does not present a risk to the ordinary users of the roadway and does not constitute a special defect. Perches, 388 S.W.3d at 655-56. The Supreme Court’s ruling was predicated upon that fact that driver in Perches ran into the guardrail only because he failed to make a turn in accordance with the roadway’s design. *Id.*

(iii) Whether the Condition is a Special Defect is Determined by the Court Not the Jury.

Whether a condition is a premise defect or a special defect is a question of duty involving statutory interpretation and thus an issue of law for the court to decide.

York II, 284 S.W.3d at 847-48.; Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 238; State v. Rodriguez, 985 S.W.2d at 86; Burris, 877 S.W.2d at 298. Accordingly, the question of whether or not a premises condition is a special defect is not submitted to the jury. Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 238.

(iv) Duty Owed in Case of a Special Defect.

A special defect eliminates the requirement of actual knowledge before the government occupant is obligated to act. In the case of a special defect, the plaintiff obtains the status of an invitee. Consequently, the governmental occupant has the duty to use ordinary care to reduce or eliminate an unreasonable risk of harm of which the defendant knew or reasonably should have known. City of Dallas v Reed, 258 SW3d at 622; Eaton, 573 S.W.2d at 179; York II, 284 S.W.3d at 847. (duty to warn of a condition the governmental entity should have known or a condition that created an unreasonable risk of harm). Therefore, the first question the jury must

decide is whether the defendant knew or in the exercise of ordinary care should have discovered the existence of the premises defect that represented an unreasonable risk of harm. *Id.*; Horrocks, 841 S.W.2d at 417; Eaton 573, S.W.2d 179. See also Taylor, 133 S.W.3d at 814-15 (county had no notice of washout as would give rise to the duty to work).

While there is agreement that a special defect requires the occupant to act based upon constructive knowledge, there is a disagreement regarding the governmental occupant’s duty of care in the case of a special defect. Payne describes the duty owed in a special defect case as follows:

If the culvert was a special defect, the State owed Payne the same duty to warn that a private landowner owes an invitee .... That duty requires an owner to use ordinary care to reduce or eliminate an unreasonable risk of harm created by a premises condition of which the owner is or reasonably should be aware.

Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 237. Eaton, however, held that a governmental defendant discharges its duty in the case of a special defect by warning of the condition. Eaton, 573 S.W.2d at 180.

Eaton’s view of duty is supported by the language of the TCA. Subsection (b) of 101.022 states that the limitation of liability to that of a licensee “does not apply to the duty to warn of special defects.” TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.022. As explained by the supreme court:

[T]his proviso of section 18(b) [now section 101.022(b)] was meant to enlarge the liability in some instances by imposing the duty to warn when there was a special defect. Accordingly, we hold that ... the County had the duty to warn as in the case of the duty one owes to an invitee.

*Id.* (emphasis added). See Horrocks, 841 S.W.2d at 417 (the presence of a special defect imposes the duty of an invitor to warn of or make reasonably safe dangerous conditions when it knows of them or could have discovered them with reasonable diligence). See also Maxwell, 880 S.W.2d at 464-65 (motorist was warned of culvert by amber reflectors). See Durham, 135 S.W.3d at 297-98 (county discharged its duty by putting up a warning sign, even though that sign was removed by third parties).

Again, the nature of the premises controlled and activities that governmental entities must conduct requires that they be able to discharge their duty by warning of the defect. The supreme court in Eaton held that a “special defect” could result from an avalanche, some other natural disaster, or from the acts of third

persons. Eaton, 573 S.W.2d at 179. If a rock slide blocks a roadway, or if an earthquake destroys a bridge, the government must be able to discharge its duty by warning of the dangerous condition until it can be repaired. Furthermore, in repairing the damage done by such a natural disaster it may be impossible to make the premises reasonably safe while construction is ongoing. Unless the governmental occupant discharges obligations by warning of the condition, it would face absolute strict liability because it would be impossible to discharge its duty.

- (v) The other exclusions from liability set forth in the TCA apply to special defect claims.

In Perches the court of appeals had found that the guardrail in question was a special defect because the roadway abruptly ended, there was a lack of signage showing the drivers could only turn one direction, and the possibility that lighting was insufficient at the time of the accident. Perches, 388 S.W.3d at 655. The Supreme Court rejected the court of appeal’s analysis holding that the design of the roadway is discretionary and the TCA provides that governmental entities cannot be held liable for discretionary decisions. *Id.* at 655-56.

- (2) The Standards of Liability in Special Defects Versus Ordinary Premises Defects Cases.

The central difference between liability in ordinary premises cases and special defect cases is the knowledge of the plaintiff and defendant. As explained by the Texas Supreme Court:

There are two differences between these theories. The first is that a licensee must prove that the premises owner actually knew of the dangerous condition, while an invitee need only prove that the owner knew or reasonably should have known. The second difference is that a licensee must prove that he did not know of the dangerous condition, while an invitee need not do so.

Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 237.

The second difference is critical to a plaintiff. For a licensee, knowledge of the condition is a complete bar to his recovery and a licensee must prove and obtain a jury finding that he was without knowledge of the dangerous condition in order to recover damages. *Id.* An invitee’s knowledge goes only to his comparative negligence. *Id.*

9. Section 101.022(a): Liability for Premises Defects When the Plaintiff Pays for the Use of the Premises.

- a. When Has the Plaintiff Paid for the Use of the Premises?

The mere payment of a fee related to the premises does not establish that the plaintiff has paid for the use of the premises. Section 101.022(a) provides that the licensor/licensee standard of care does not apply when the plaintiff pays for the use of the premises. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.022(a). The “payment” must be “for the use” of the premises at issue in the litigation. Kitchen, 867 S.W.2d at 786-87. See Tex. Parks & Wildlife Dep’t, 988 S.W.2d at 372-374. Thus, in Kitchen, the Texas Supreme Court held that the payment of vehicle registration and licensing fees did not constitute payment for the use of a state highway. *Id.*; Garcia, 817 S.W.2d at 741. Garcia further holds that the payment of fuel taxes was not a payment for the use of the roadway. *Id.* In Daniels v. Univ. of Tex. Health Sci. Ctr., the First District Court of Appeals in Houston refused to extend Kitchen to cover a bus driver at the medical center injured when she stepped in a hole. 2004 WL 2613282 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2004, no pet. h.). The court rejected Daniels’s argument that a property owner should not receive more protection when one he pays for services is injured than when someone who pays for entry onto the property is injured. *Id.*

However, the payment of fees for services provided at the premises may mean that the plaintiff is an invitee. For example, the First Court of Appeals held that the payment of medical charges at a government owned hospital constituted payment for the use of the hospital premises. Felter, 837 S.W.2d at 247-48. Thus, a couple’s payment of hospital charges meant that a wife injured while visiting her husband was an invitee rather than a licensee. Similarly, the Austin court found the fee to enter a state park was a payment for the use of that premises and granted the plaintiff status as an invitee in the park. Tex. Parks & Wildlife Dep’t, 988 S.W.2d at 372-74. The Second Court of Appeals has also held that “indirectly” paying a municipality to use a premises may create invitee status for the user of the premises. City of Fort Worth v. Posey, 593 S.W.3d 924, 931 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth 2020, no pet. h.). The Fort Worth Court of Appeals held that a payment to Junior League, which in turn had contract with city to use premises explicitly including place of injury, potentially established invitee status for the the plaintiff. *Id.*

Following Kitchen, section 101.022(a) will have very limited applications in the case of defects on roadways. Clearly, the payment of vehicle registration and licensing fees, as well as fuel taxes, will be insufficient to establish that the plaintiff has paid for the use of any road on the state highway system. Kitchen, 867 S.W.2d at 786-87. Similarly, the payment of



supplemental county vehicle registration fees should not constitute payment for the use of county or city roads. Under Kitchen, only the payment of a toll for the use of toll roads could create a situation where the plaintiff will be considered as having paid for the use of the particular roadway. See *id.*; Tex. Parks & Wildlife Dep’t, 988 S.W.2d 372-74.

Kitchen also has long reaching implications when the plaintiff will be considered to have paid for the use of other types of governmental premises. Under Kitchen, the payment of state, county, or city taxes will not mean that a plaintiff has paid for the use of a particular government building or property. Only a fee charged for entry onto a particular premises, such as the purchase of a ticket to get into a zoo, museum, gallery, concert hall, or theater, will mean that the plaintiff must be considered as an invitee under § 101.022(a).

- (1) Section 101.022(a) does not apply to recreational facilities.

As set forth in section VIII c below, Chapter 75 of the Civil Practice and Remedies Code establishes the standard of care that landowners, including governmental entities, owe to persons who use recreational facilities (such as parks).

Chapter 75 provides that the duty owed to users of recreational facilities is that owed to a trespasser, namely not injuring willfully, wantonly or through gross negligence. See TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 75.002. Chapter 75 sets the standard of care for recreational facilities even when the plaintiff pays an admission fee to get into the park or other recreational facility. State v. Shumake, 131 S.W.3d 66, 81 (Tex.App.—Austin 2003, pet. filed), *aff’d*, 199 S.W.3d 279 (Tex. 2006).

b. Duty Owed to Plaintiff That Has Paid for the Use of the Premises.

If the injured person paid for the use of the premises, then the government owes the person a duty owed to an invitee on private property. Tex. Parks & Wildlife Dep’t, 988 S.W.2d 372-74. Therefore, the governmental entity’s duty arises when it has actual or constructive knowledge of a dangerous condition. *Id.*; Rawlings v. Angelo State Univ., 648 S.W.2d 430, 433 (Tex.App.—Austin 1983, writ ref’d n.r.e.). However, the extent of the governmental defendant’s duty is the same as if the plaintiff were a licensee.

As to invitees, an occupier of property owes a duty to maintain the premises in a reasonably safe condition; a duty of reasonable care to inspect and discover a condition involving an unreasonable risk of harm; and a duty to

protect against the danger and make safe any defects or to give an adequate warning thereof. *Id.*

Once again, the governmental occupant discharges its duty if it warns of the premises defect. *Id.*

10. Sections 101.022(a) and 101.060: Liability for Signs, Signals and Traffic Control Devices.

Claims involving signs, signals and traffic control devices are special categories of premises liability cases to which additional liability limitations apply under the TCA. Section 101.022 provides two exceptions to the basic premises liability licensor duty of care. One exception for special defects and another for cases involving the “... absence, condition, or malfunction of traffic signs, signals, or warning devices as is required by section 101.060.” Section 101.060 states:

Traffic and Road Control Devices

- (a) This chapter does not apply to a claim arising from:
- (1) the failure of a governmental unit initially to place a traffic or road sign, signal, or warning device if the failure is the result of discretionary action of the governmental unit;
  - (2) the absence, condition, or malfunction of a traffic, or road sign, signal, or warning device unless the absence, condition, or malfunction is not corrected by the responsible governmental unit within a reasonable time after notice; or
  - (3) the removal or destruction of a traffic or road sign, signal, or warning device by a third person unless the governmental unit fails to correct the removal or destruction within a reasonable time after actual notice.
- (b) The signs, signals, and warning devices referred to in this section are those used in connection with hazards normally connected with the use of the roadway.<sup>18</sup>

TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE ANN. § 101.060 (West 2005).

Section 101.060 does more than simply define the government’s duty in connection with the absence, condition, or malfunction of a traffic or road sign, signal, or warning device. A claimant’s failure to establish that the government has breached this duty

does not apply to the duty to warn of special defects such as excavations or roadway obstructions.”

<sup>18</sup> Section 101.060(c) further provides that: “This section

results in the claim’s being barred because there is no waiver of sovereign immunity. But see Tex. Facilities Comm’n v. Speer, 559 S.W.3d 245 (Tex. App.—Austin 2018)(“traffic or road sign, signal, or warning device” does not extend to the cable barrier or reflectors).

The term “condition” as used in subsection (2) “refers to either an intentional or an inadvertent state of being.” For example, a city could be liable for not fixing a red arrow stop signal that it knew caused problems for drivers deciding what to do when confronted with the red arrow. Sparkman v. Maxwell, 519 S.W.2d 852 (Tex. 1975). Similarly, the failure to replace a stop sign within a reasonable time of learning that it had been stolen could be the basis of liability. City of Dallas v. Donovan, 768 S.W.2d 905, 908-909 (Tex.App.—Dallas 1989, no writ). On the other hand, the fact that a stop sign could be stolen easily by vandals could not form the basis of suit under section 101.060. Lawson v. Estate of McDonald, 524 S.W.2d 351, 356 (Tex. Civ. App.—Waco 1975, writ ref’d n.r.e.).

[T]he term [“condition” as used in the Act] refers to the maintenance of a sign or signal in a condition sufficient to properly perform the function of traffic control for which it is relied upon by the traveling public. This must be so, inasmuch as there are other provisions in the statute expressly relieving the State from liability for claims growing out of the removal of signs, signals and devices by third parties without a reasonable time for replacement after actual notice to the State of the removal.

*Id.* “[T]he Texas Tort Claims Act will hold the state is liable only if it has knowledge that a sign is not performing its function.” Creek v. Tex. State Dep’t of Highways, 826 S.W.2d 797, 802 (Tex.App. —Houston [14th Dist.] 1992, writ denied) (emphasis added).

In Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Garza, 70 S.W.3d 802 (Tex. 2002), the Supreme Court had to determine what constituted a “condition” that would give rise to liability for a road sign under §101.060(a)(2). As noted above, TCA §101.060(a)(2) provides that a governmental entity can be held liable for the condition or malfunction of a traffic sign or traffic control device if it fails to correct the problem within a reasonable time after learning that the device or signal is not functioning properly. Garza, 70 S.W.3d at 807-08.

The Supreme Court noted that a governmental entity can be held liable under (a)(2) where the view of a traffic sign or signal is obstructed, the sign or signal has fallen down or is not functioning, or the sign or signal conveyed the wrong traffic control information. *Id.* at 887-08. The Garzas, however, were complaining about a speed limit sign that was in place and showed the proper speed limit. The Garzas contended that the speed limit sign was not functioning properly because

its location did not cause cars to slow down far enough in advance of the school zone it marked. The Supreme Court rejected this argument and found that the Department of Transportation cannot be liable because the sign correctly displayed the speed limit.

Accordingly, under sections 101.021(2) and 101.060(a)(2), no ‘condition’ was present requiring corrective action by TxDOT. At most, the Garzas have alleged that TxDOT improperly set the speed limit in the area of 45 miles per hour ... ‘the source of the alleged problem ... is the setting of the legal speed limit, not the sign displaying that limit.’

*Id.* at 808 (quoting Bellnoa v. City of Austin, 894 S.W.2d 821, 825 (Tex.App.—Austin 1995, no writ)).

However, even if the Department of Transportation knows that a sign is being stolen frequently, the Supreme Court held that it is not liable unless it failed to replace the sign within a reasonable time of its “actual” notice that it was stolen. State v. Gonzalez, 82 S.W.3d 322 (Tex. 2002). In Gonzalez, the issue was whether liability for a stop sign that had been repeatedly stolen by vandals was covered by TCA §101.060(a)(2) or (a)(3). The accident in Gonzalez resulted from a stop sign being stolen at the intersection of two farm-to-market roads. It was uncontested that TxDOT regularly had to replace the stop sign at issue because it was being stolen or vandalized so frequently. Because of the frequency with which the stop sign was being stolen, the plaintiffs contended that §101.060(a)(2) controlled the determination of liability. The plaintiffs argued that because TxDOT knew the sign was being stolen and vandalized frequently, it had actual notice that the sign was not serving its intended purpose and had not made efforts to cure the malfunction within a reasonable time after having such notice. *Id.* at 327-28. The plaintiffs contended that the highway department was liable for failing to put up additional signs or signals indicating that traffic on one of the farm-to-market roads should stop or for failure to prevent vandals from being able to remove the stop signs.

The Supreme Court rejected the plaintiffs’ arguments, stating that §101.060(a)(3) controls liability in all cases where third persons remove a traffic control device or cause that device not to work. *Id.* at 321-30. “The removal or destruction of a traffic or road sign ... by a third person [cannot be the basis of liability] unless the governmental unit fails to correct the removal or destruction within a reasonable time [of having] actual notice [of removal or destruction].” TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 101.060(a)(3). Consequently, because the stop sign had been removed by vandals, TxDOT could not be held liable unless it failed to replace the stop sign within a reasonable time of when it had “actual” notice of the stop sign being stolen. *Id.* at 329-30. There was

no evidence that TxDOT had notice that the stop sign had been stolen at the time of the auto accident. *Id.* Therefore, judgment was rendered that the plaintiffs take nothing. Gonzalez is in accord with earlier courts of appeals cases on similar issues.

Creek demonstrates the extent of liability under this section of the TCA. Creek arose out of an intersection collision allegedly caused by a missing stop sign. There was no allegation or evidence that the state had actual knowledge the stop sign was down. Plaintiff alleged, and the jury found, that the stop sign had been installed without enough concrete around the base, thus creating a dangerous condition likely to result in its being knocked down, and that the state had actual knowledge of this. Following the reasoning of Estate of McDonald, the Creek court rejected plaintiff’s theory that liability under §101.060 could be predicated upon the failure to install a stop sign with sufficient concrete to hold the sign upright. The Fourteenth Court of Appeals held that “‘condition’ ... of ... property contained in Section 101.021 of the Act does not refer to the original installation of a stop sign insofar as whether it was imbedded in a sufficient amount of concrete or in a hole of sufficient depth.” *Id.* The court went on to hold that the plaintiff could establish liability in the case of a missing stop sign only by showing that the government had actual knowledge that the sign was absent. *Id.*

Plaintiff’s theory that the dangerous condition was the negligently installed stop sign, and not the downed stop sign, is a variation on the negligent activity theory rejected in Keetch, which was decided by the supreme court after Creek. In a premises liability case, an owner/occupier has potential liability only for a dangerous condition that actually causes the accident. Creek’s accident was caused by the stop sign’s being down, not by the way the sign had been installed in the first place. *See id.*

In City of Grapevine v. Sipes, the Texas Supreme Court addressed a governmental entity’s liability under section 101.060(a)(2) when the entity decides to put a traffic control device in place but does not do so in a timely manner. City of Grapevine v. Sipes, 195 S.W.3d 689 (Tex. 2006). In Sipes, a series of accidents at the intersection of two highways near construction of a large mall led the city to decide to install a traffic signal. *Id.* The city set a target date for installing the signal, but the signal was not actually installed until over a month later. *Id.* Between the time the signal was to be installed and the date it was actually installed, Sipes and her daughter were injured in an accident at the intersection. *Id.* Sipes brought suit alleging the city was liable under Section 101.060(a)(2). Sipes argued that the delay in installing the signal created liability because the city failed to act within a “reasonable time after notice” of the need for the light. *Id.* The Supreme Court held that the city could not be liable because liability under

Section 101.060(a)(2) requires the preexistence of the signal. The court pointed out that while an entity may decide to install a traffic signal at a given location, intervening events may lead to a decision to delay or cancel installation because there are other more important priorities. *Id.*

The obstruction of a stop sign from view by trees or branches is a “condition” that can form the basis of liability.

Accordingly if a city has prior notice of such a condition and fails to remedy such condition within a reasonable time, it may be liable under the Texas Tort Claims Act.

Lorig v. City of Mission, 629 S.W.2d 699, 701 (Tex. 1982). *See* Tex. Dep’t. Transp. v. Pate, 170 S.W.3d 840 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 2005, pet. denied); Parker County v. Shankles, 2003 WL 22026592 (Tex. App. — Fort Worth 2003, pet. denied) (vegetation off of county property was a condition affecting stop sign).

a. Liability Based Upon “Notice” or “Actual Notice.”

(1) “Actual Notice” Defined.

Actual notice is “information concerning a fact actually communicated to or obtained by a city employee responsible for acting on the information so received or obtained.” Donovan, 768 S.W.2d at 905, 908.

(2) “Notice” Defined.

Notice may be defined as information concerning a fact actually communicated to a person by an authorized person, as information actually derived by him from a proper source, or else as information presumed by the law to have been acquired. Presumed information is considered the equivalent, in legal effect, of full knowledge. It has also been determined that “imputed actual notice carries with it the same legal consequences as conscious knowledge.” State v. Norris, 550 S.W.2d 386, 389 (Tex. Civ. App.—Corpus Christi 1977, writ ref’d n.r.e.).

b. Section 101.060 Applies Only if the Defendant’s Employees Did Not Cause the Malfunction or Absence.

The standard of liability established by §101.060 applies only if an employee of the defendant did not cause or contribute to the absence or malfunction of the traffic control device. Ramming, 861 S.W.2d at 465-66. The Ramming court held that this section of the TCA is applicable only when the absence or malfunction of a traffic sign or signal is the result of an act of God, or the result of some third party not under the control of the defendant. When a traffic signal is disconnected through the actions of the defendant’s agent, however, the plaintiff does not need to establish that the defendant

failed to fix or repair the device within a reasonable time of learning that the device was absent or malfunctioning. *Id.* Following the Ramming decision, if a traffic sign or signal is removed, non-functioning, or otherwise not operating properly as a result of the actions of defendant’s employees, defendant will be held liable under a negligence standard for any injuries resulting from the employee’s removal of the traffic control device. *Id.*

c. Traffic Control Devices Covered by Section 101.060.

The signs, signals, and traffic control devices to which section 101.060 applies are those used in connection with hazards normally connected with the use of the roadway, and not to special defects. Palmer made this distinction and held that legally parked cars are not special defects:

We hold that, as a matter of law, a legally parked car and the consequences of a narrowed passageway, is a “hazard[s] normally connected with the use of the roadway” under Sec. 101.060 of the Act and therefore the City cannot be held liable for failing to warn of the “condition” because its failure to warn was the result of discretionary actions of said governmental unit.

Palmer, 607 S.W.2d at 300; Burris, 877 S.W.2d at 299 (motor vehicle momentarily stopped on the highway was not a special defect).

d. Discretionary Signal Placement and the Texas Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices.

For a period of time the significance of the Texas Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (the “Manual”) in signage cases was uncertain. The Manual was adopted by the State Highway and Public Transportation Commission under authority conferred by TRANSPORTATION CODE § 544.001 (West 1999). Section 544.002 authorizes the State Department of Highways and Public Transportation to place signs conforming to the Manual on state highways. *Id.* Transportation Code §544.002 also authorizes local governmental units to place signs conforming to the Manual on highways under their jurisdiction. *Id.*

Sign applications are either mandatory, advisory or permissive under the Manual. The Supreme Court has held that even the placement of signs that the Manual provides as “mandatory,” is discretionary and subject to the exemption from liability provided in section 101.060(a) of the Act. State Dep’t of Highways v. King, 808 S.W.2d 465 (Tex. 1991); see Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Andrews, 155 S.W.3d 351 (Tex.App.–Fort Worth 2005, pet. denied) (neither state nor federal manual waives immunity). The Court noted that the Manual

itself declares that it is no substitute for engineering judgment, and that the statute authorizing adoption of the Manual affords the State discretion in placing traffic control devices. *Id.* at 466. TEX. TRANSP. CODE §§ 544.001-544.002 (Vernon 1999), provided for discretion in the initial placement of signs. TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE ANN. § 101.060(a)(1) exempts from liability the initial failure to place signs, signals, or warning devices, assuming the failure is a result of discretionary action. Villarreal, 810 S.W.2d at 420-21. Additionally, other traffic sign and signal manuals containing language similar to the Manual do not override the exemption from liability created by section 101.060. Bellnoa, 894 S.W.2d at 827 (provisions of the City of Austin School Safety Manual that was similar to the Manual “does not impose a non-discretionary duty on the City”). However, a local governmental entity can be held liable for failure to install traffic control devices in accordance with the local governmental entity’s ordinance or law. Sullivan, 33 S.W.3d at 13-15 (city could be held liable for failing to operate school zone cross-walk signals in manner consistent with city ordinance.)

The protection afforded by TCA §101.060 does not extend to a governmental entity’s duty to warn of special defects or repair traffic control devices it chooses to install. Section 101.060(c) requires governmental entities to warn of special defects. Moreover, it requires governmental entities to warn of special defects even if the decision to place signs, signals or traffic control warnings would otherwise be considered discretionary. Maxwell, 880 S.W.2d at 463-64. Following this rationale, the Austin court concluded that a governmental entity could not rely upon the discretionary act defense established by §101.060(a) when the premises condition at issue is a special defect. *Id.* The court concluded that when a special defect exists, there is a “mandatory duty” to warn of that defect. *Id.*

Additionally, while the initial installation of signs and signals may be discretionary, once installed the governmental entity has the duty to maintain them under TCA §101.060(a)(2). Sullivan, 33 S.W.3d at 11-12.

11. Section 101.023: Limitations on the Amount of a Governmental Unit’s Liability.

Section 101.023 establishes four liability caps based upon the governmental entity’s being sued. State government liability for money damages is limited to \$250,000.00 for each person, \$500,000.00 for each single occurrence of bodily injury or death, and \$100,000.00 for a single occurrence of damage to or destruction of property. For local governmental entities other than cities, their liability for money damages is limited to \$100,000.00 for each person, \$300,000.00 for each single occurrence of bodily injury or death, and \$100,000.00 for each single occurrence of injury or

destruction of property. A municipality’s liability under the TCA is limited to a maximum amount of \$250,000.00 for each person, \$500,000.00 for each single occurrence of bodily injury or death, and \$100,000.00 for each single occurrence of damage or destruction to property.<sup>19</sup> Finally, the liability that may be incurred by an emergency service organization is limited to money damages in a maximum amount of \$100,000.00 for each person, \$300,000.00 for each single occurrence for bodily injury or death, and \$100,000.00 for injury to or destruction of property.

Texas courts have upheld the constitutionality of liability limits established by the Act. At common law, plaintiffs could not bring a tort claim against governmental entities, therefore, the liability cap does not violate the due process and equal protection clauses of the United States and Texas Constitutions. Ray, 712 S.W.2d at 273; Tarrant County Water Control & Improvement Dist. No. 1 v. Crossland, 781 S.W.2d 427, 439 (Tex.App.–Fort Worth 1989, writ denied), *rev’d on other grounds*, City of Dallas v. Mitchell, 870 S.W.2d 21 (Tex. 1994). See Univ. of Tex. Med. Branch v. York, 808 S.W.2d 106, 111 (Tex.App.–Houston [1st Dist.] 1991), *rev’d on other grounds*, 871 S.W.2d 175 (Tex. 1994). Additionally, the liability cap has withstood challenges that it deprives plaintiffs of the right to trial by jury. Ray, 712 S.W.2d at 273. In upholding the constitutionality of the liability limitations, the courts point out that before the enactment of the TCA, governmental units, except for municipalities, were immune from tort liability. City of Austin v. Cooksey, 570 S.W.2d 386, 387 (Tex. 1978). Accordingly, if plaintiffs are going to enjoy the benefits of the TCA, they must also accept the liability limits established therein. *Id.*

The courts have also interpreted section 101.023 so as to further limit the liability of governmental units. In Cooksey, the supreme court held that a governmental unit’s maximum liability is determined by the number of persons actually involved in the accident, as opposed to the number of plaintiffs and an intervenor. Only one individual was involved in the accident that gave rise to the suit. At that time, a county’s maximum liability was limited to \$100,000.00 per person and \$300,000.00 per single occurrence. The court held that:

When one person is injured or killed, and one plaintiff brings suit, the applicable limit of liability is \$100,000.00. That limit should not change simply because the deceased is survived by two or more statutory beneficiaries under the wrongful death statute.

The controversy here centers around whether the term “per person” in the statute refers to the person injured or those persons who suffered a loss as a result of the injury to someone else. We think the clear meaning of the statute is that it refers to the person or persons who sustain injury.

*Id.* at 387-88; Whipple v. Deltscheff, 731 S.W.2d 700, 705 (Tex.App.–Houston [14th Dist.] 1987, writ ref’d n.r.e.). Furthermore, the plaintiff’s total recovery, including prejudgment interest, cannot exceed the liability cap. Weller v. State, 682 S.W.2d 234 (Tex. 1984); York II, 808 S.W.2d at 111-12. The statutory cap on award of damages applies to and limits the recovery of prejudgment interest even when the plaintiff makes an offer to settle for the maximum statutory amount and the offer is rejected. *Id.* The statutory maximum amount of recovery under the TCA, however, does not apply to recovery of post-judgment interest. *Id.*

On the other hand, a governmental entity’s offsets for contribution, indemnity, or reductions for the percentage of negligence attributable to another party are calculated from the plaintiff’s total damages rather than the defendant’s liability cap. Trevino, 941 S.W.2d at 81-82; Univ. of Tex. v. Nava, 701 S.W.2d 71, 72-73 (Tex.App.–El Paso 1985, no writ). In Nava, the plaintiff’s total damages were \$160,000.00 and responsibility for these damages were assigned 50% to the plaintiff and 50% to the defendant. The trial court reduced the plaintiff’s recovery to \$80,000.00. The State argued that the 50% reduction should be made from its maximum liability, \$100,000.00, limiting plaintiff’s recovery to \$50,000.00. The El Paso court found that there was no justification for calculating the offset from the defendant’s liability cap. *Id.* Similarly, any adjustments for contribution for payments made by settling defendants is applied to the plaintiff’s total recovery, not from the governmental entity’s liability cap. Trevino, 941 S.W.2d at 81-82. Accordingly, any reduction for settlements, or comparative negligence should be calculated from the plaintiff’s total damages. *Id.*; Nava, 701 S.W.2d at 72-73.

Finally, the TCA’s prohibition on the recovery of exemplary damages does not extend to proprietary activities claims against municipalities. Section 101.024 states that the Act does not authorize the recovery of exemplary damages for suits brought thereunder. The TCA does not control suits against municipalities involved in proprietary activities. Turvey, 602 S.W.2d at 519. Thus, the TCA preserves a plaintiff’s common law right to seek “unlimited

<sup>19</sup> Of the various types of local governmental entities, only municipalities have the higher liability cap. Edinburg Hosp.

Auth. v. Trevino, 941 S.W.2d 76, 82-83 (Tex. 1997) (J. Hecht, concurring). Thus, a hospital district’s liability is limited to a \$100,000/\$300,000 cap. *Id.*

damages” for negligent acts of municipalities engaged in proprietary functions. *Id.*

In *Pike*, 727 S.W.2d at 518-24, the supreme court held that unlimited common law liability extended to claims for punitive damages and established a standard for their recovery. Municipalities can be held liable for punitive damages as a result of proprietary activities when the plaintiff proves: (1) the active tortfeasor “engaged in willful, wanton, malicious, or grossly negligent conduct ... [demonstrating] that the acts giving rise to the claim were committed with such malice or evil intent, or such gross negligence as to be equivalent to such intent;” and (2) the acts were attributable to the municipality through a showing that they “were expressly authorized by the municipal government or that they were done ‘bona fide in pursuance of general authority to act for the municipality on the subject which they relate’ ... [l]iability must rest on official policy, meaning the city government’s policy and not the policy of an individual officer.” *Id.* at 523.

## VI. LIMITATIONS ON WAIVER OF SOVEREIGN IMMUNITY UNDER THE TCA

This section of the paper addresses particular defenses to governmental liability aside and apart of establishing that the defendant was not negligent or defeating one element of a premises liability claim. Generally speaking, the defenses break down into two different categories: (1) those defenses that carry over from common law; and (2) the special defenses (or exclusions from liability) created by the TCA

### A. Common Law Defenses.

#### 1. Sovereign Immunity.

As set out in Section III A above, sovereign immunity remains a defense to both suit and liability. Governmental entities continue to enjoy sovereign immunity from suit and liability. *York*, 871 S.W.2d at 445-46; *Horrocks*, 841 S.W.2d at 416. See *City of Watauga v. Gordon*, 434 S.W.3d at 589 (Tex. 2014) (“[g]overnmental immunity generally protects municipalities and other state subdivisions from suit unless the immunity has been waived by the constitution or state law.”); *Alexander v. Walker*, 2014 WL 293549, \*2 (Tex. 2014). A plaintiff has permission to sue and assert a waiver of immunity only if liability arises under the TCA or other statute. *York*, 871 S.W.2d at 445-46; *Horrocks*, 841 S.W.2d at 416. See *City of Watauga v. Gordon*, 434 S.W.3d at 589; *City of Bellaire v. Johnson*, 400 S.W.3d 922, 924 (Tex. 2013) (unless the TCA creates a waiver of immunity, then the suit is barred by sovereign/governmental immunity). TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 101.025. As explained by the Eastland Court of Appeals, “[w]hen the [Tort Claims Act] does not apply, immunity is still the rule.” *General Elec. Co.*, 795 S.W.2d at 313; *Maxwell*, 880 S.W.2d at 463. Thus, a plaintiff must be able to point to a clear waiver of

immunity, or his suit is barred. *Ramming*, 861 S.W.2d at 486-87; *Valdez*, 869 S.W.2d at 447; *Schaefer v. City of San Antonio*, 838 S.W.2d 688, 691, 693 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 1992, no writ).

The defense of sovereign immunity is often applied in cases where the TCA recognizes a cause of action, but the plaintiff seeks to hold the defendant liable under the wrong standard of liability. In the premises liability context, this arises typically in two very similar types of cases. The first instance occurs in cases such as *Tennison*, in which the defect is a “dangerous condition,” and liability is predicated upon a negligence standard of liability. *Tennison*, 509 S.W.2d at 560. The plaintiff’s failure to establish that the defendant had actual knowledge of the condition precludes liability. The second instance also involves the application of the wrong standard of liability. In these cases, such as *Payne III* and *Kitchen*, the plaintiff alleges that the premises defect constitutes a “special defect,” but in fact it is merely a “dangerous condition.” *Dep’t of Highways and Pub. Transp. v. Payne*, 781 S.W.2d 318 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1989) *rev’d on other grounds*, 838 S.W.2d 235 (Tex. 1992) (“*Payne III*”); *Kitchen*, 867 S.W.2d at 784. Again, the failure to obtain a finding of actual knowledge means the defendant cannot be held liable.

These cases hold lessons of critical importance for both plaintiffs and defendants. A plaintiff must make certain there is a waiver of immunity. Furthermore, a plaintiff must also insure that he obtains from the jury all of the findings necessary to support a judgment against the governmental defendant based upon the type of defect at issue. If there is any doubt as to the applicable standards of liability, both standards should be submitted to the jury. See *Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Cotner*, 877 S.W.2d 64, 66-67 (Tex.App.—Waco 1994, writ denied) (whether ice on bridge was not a special defect was immaterial where jury found for plaintiff licensor/licensee liability issues). See also *Zachary*, 824 S.W.2d at 813. Defense attorneys, on the other hand, must make sure to take the procedural steps necessary to assert the standard of limited liability created by the TCA in premises liability cases. Pleading sovereign immunity, however, is not sufficient to perfect a record for appeal. Defense counsel must make sure that her objections and exceptions are sufficient to obtain a reversal on appeal. See *Payne*, 838 S.W.2d at 239-41; *Koblizek*, 752 S.W.2d at 660.

#### 2. Exhaustion of Administrative Remedies.

Generally, a plaintiff must exhaust his administrative remedies prior to filing suit. The requirement to exhaust administrative remedies may arise as an express prerequisite to filing suit or because an administrative agency has exclusive jurisdiction initially.

Where the Legislature grants an administrative agency sole authority to make an initial determination, the agency has exclusive jurisdiction. City of Houston v. Rhule, 417 S.W.3d 440, 442 (Tex. 2013). In those cases, the plaintiff must exhaust his administrative remedies before filing suit. *Id.* Whether the administrative agency has exclusive jurisdiction is a question of law. *Id.* A trial court lacks subject matter jurisdiction where the plaintiff fails to exhaust administrative remedies. *Id.* Thus, Rhule’s failure to assert his breach of workers compensation settlement to the Division of Workers’ Compensation deprived the trial court of subject matter jurisdiction. *Id.* at 442-43.

Similarly, a plaintiff cannot bring suit under the Whistleblower statute unless he exhausts any available grievance process in accordance with that statute. Harris County, 122 SW3d at 277 (“that statutory prerequisite that a plaintiff in a Whistleblower action timely initiate a grievance is a jurisdictional requirement, the failure of which may be challenges by way of a plea to the jurisdiction”); Texas S. Univ., 84 SW3d at 792; Leatherwood, 2004 WL 253275, at \*3. In fact, a plaintiff cannot bring suit under the Whistleblower statute, until he exhausts his administrative remedies before the Human Rights Commission, if his claim also falls within the exclusive jurisdiction of the Texas Commission, City of Waco, 259 SW3d 156. See also Texas Commission on Human Rights Act. Prairie View A&M Univ. v. Chatha, 381 S.W.3d 510-514 (a plaintiff must file a timely charge of discrimination with the THC in order to bring a discrimination suit under the TCHRA).

There are a few, rare exceptions to the requirement of exhausting administrative remedies. The Supreme Court began its opinion in State v. Fid. & Deposit Co. of Maryland, 223, S.W.3d 309, 310 (Tex., 2007), by stating that a party must exhaust any administrative remedies before filing suit. While the court did not hold that exhaustion of administrative remedies was a prerequisite to filing suit, the holding was based solely on the fact that the contract at issue was not subject to mandatory administrative resolution of the statute. However, the lesson from City of Waco v. Lopez, is that a plaintiff who fails to exhaust all available administrative remedies proceeds at the risk of having viable claims dismissed with prejudice. See City of Waco, 259 SW3d at 156.

### 3. In Premises Case; Lack of Ownership or Control of the Premises.

Premises liability under the TCA is subject to the principles of common law premises liability cases. Accordingly, a governmental entity is entitled to the defenses a premises occupant enjoys at common law.

The principle common law defense that carries over to governmental premises liability is the defense of lack of ownership or control of the premises. The first

requirement in premises liability is proof of the defendant’s possession or control of the premises. After all, a defendant cannot be held liable for the condition of real property if he lacks the authority to inspect and improve the premises. See Gunn, 887 S.W.2d at 251-52. Accordingly, a governmental entity must own, occupy, or control the premises, or create the dangerous condition before it can be held liable for a premise defect. Cantu, 831 S.W.2d at 425. See also Vela, 703 S.W.2d at 721 (plaintiff’s decedent drowned in water beyond state beach park). But see Nichols, 609 S.W.2d at 573-74 (DPS held liable for failure to report to the Highway Department or to remain at the scene of a washed out section of roadway three to five feet wide and three to four feet deep, extending across the entire highway discovered by two of its officers).

Cantu exemplifies the requirement that the defendant must control the premises on which the defect is located. In Cantu, a child drowned when he fell into a reservoir. The plaintiffs sued the City based upon the City’s lease of the park adjacent to the reservoir. The park came to the edge of the reservoir. Cantu, 831 S.W.2d at 419-20. The court focused on the fact that the child drowned in the reservoir that was not controlled by the City. *Id.* at 424-25. The San Antonio Court of Appeals held that because the child drowned in the reservoir, not the park, the premises containing the dangerous condition was not controlled by the defendant. *Id.*; see Gunn, 887 S.W.2d at 251-52.

Recently, the Fort Worth Court of Appeals held that “control” over the premises is the threshold issue in a premises liability case. In Gunn, the defendant hospital moved for, and was granted, summary judgment based upon an affidavit which stated that it “did not own, operate or maintain the premises where Gunn was injured.” *Id.* at 251. In affirming summary judgment for the hospital, the Fort Worth court stated “[o]ur review of the case law reveals that the critical inquiry in a premise liability case does not focus on occupancy, but on ‘control’ over the premises.” *Id.* (emphasis added). The Fort Worth court then turned to the Restatement (Second) of Torts, § 328E which establishes the test of whether the defendant is an owner or occupier of land based upon whether or not he is a “possessor.”

A possessor of land is:

- (a) a person who is in occupation of the land with intent to control it; or
- (b) a person who is or has been in occupation of land with intent to control it, if no other person has subsequently occupied it with intent to control it; or
- (c) a person who is entitled to immediate occupancy of the land if no other person is in possession under Clauses (a) and (b).

*Id.* (quoting Restatement (Second) of Torts, § 328E (1965)). The Fort Worth court held that a defendant’s duty to warn of a defect in the premises arises only if he is “an occupier with control of the premises.” *Id.* (citations omitted, emphasis in original). The Fort Worth court went on to explain:

We recognize that the phrase “occupier of premises” has been interpreted in Texas to mean the party in control of the premises. However, a party may occupy a premises, in whole or in part, without actually controlling it. Therefore, instead of focusing on the term “occupy” as [the plaintiff] argues we must review the [defendant’s] summary judgment evidence to determine if ... it proves that the hospital did not exercise control over the premises.

...

The term “control” is defined as the power or authority to manage, direct, superintend, restrict, regulate, govern, administer, or oversee. Further, the meaning of words “operate” and “own” are generally understood to indicate an ability to manage and control.

*Id.* (emphasis in original, citations omitted). Thus, the court concluded that in the absence of controverting evidence, the hospital’s affidavit stating that it did not own, operate, or maintain the premises where the plaintiff was injured, established its entitlement to summary judgment based upon lack of control. *Id.* But see Couch v. Ector County, 860 S.W.2d 659 (Tex.App.—El Paso 1993, no writ) (reversing summary judgment where defendant did not prove lack of control over off-road premise).

## B. Special Statutory Exclusions to the Act’s Waiver of Sovereign Immunity.

As well as common law defenses, the liability of a governmental entity is subject to the exceptions provided elsewhere in the TCA. Therefore, governmental entities can also avail themselves of defenses or exclusions from liability created by the TCA.

### 1. Section 101.061, Liability for Actions and Omissions Before and After 1970.

The TCA exempts from liability actions taken before January 1, 1970. The TCA expressly provides that it does not apply to, and nor can a governmental entity be held liable for, acts or omissions that occurred before January 1, 1970. TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 101.061 (Vernon 1997). Section 101.061 bars suits in which the plaintiff’s premises liability cause of action is based upon the design and construction of a road

completed prior to January 1970. Shives, 743 S.W.2d at 716; Burnett v. State Dep’t of Highways and Pub. Transp., 694 S.W.2d 210, 211 (Tex.App.—Eastland 1985, writ ref’d n.r.e.). See Crossland, 781 S.W.2d at 431-32 (defendants could not be held liable where bridge and reservoir, that allegedly caused the accident, were designed and construction completed prior to the effective date of the TCA). But see Tex. Parks & Wildlife Dep’t, 988 S.W.2d at 372 (state cannot be held liable if structure was completed before 1970 and remains in the same condition; but 1970 exclusion does not protect entity from liability for failure to maintain); City of Tyler v. Likes, 962 S.W.2d 489, 501 (Tex. 1997) (while city’s pre-1970 decision on whether to construct public improvements are exercises of governmental power for which it cannot be held liable, however construction and maintenance of a storm sewer before 1970 was a proprietary for which the City could be held liable); City of Fort Worth v. Adams, 888 S.W.2d 607 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 1994, writ denied) (city could be liable for pre-1970 drainage design, because until 1987 the design of public works was a proprietary function for which cities could be held liable). As explained by the Austin Court of Appeals:

If the [governmental defendant] proves that the culvert was completed before 1970 and has remained in the same condition since that time, then, as a matter of law, the [governmental defendant] is entitled to immunity under section 101.061.

Maxwell, 880 S.W.2d at 465. Thus, section 101.061 bars suits based solely upon acts and omissions that occurred before the effective date of the Act or upon the failure to maintain (i.e., preserve as was originally constructed) thereafter. Tex. Parks & Wildlife Dep’t, 988 S.W.2d at 372; Barron, 880 S.W.2d at 302; Maxwell, 880 S.W.2d at 465.

#### a. Is There a Duty to Improve or Warn of Premises Constructed Before 1970?

Pre-1970 immunity extends to the failure to improve roadways, buildings, and other structures built before 1970. Courts of appeals have held that governmental entities cannot be held liable for failing to add warning signs or signals to roads, bridges, and other public works completed before 1970. *Id.* at 465-66; Valdez, 869 S.W.2d at 446-47; Crossland, 781 S.W.2d at 431-33; Burnett, 694 S.W.2d at 211 (the Highway Department could not be held liable for failing to modify a median guard fence on a roadway which was built before 1970). Thus, section 101.061 bars suits based solely upon acts and omissions that occurred before the effective date of the TCA or upon the failure to make improvements thereafter. *Id.* “The act or omission is the actual building of the structure.... Failure to provide



additional safety features and devices after 1970 does not constitute an act or omission within the meaning of section 101.061.” Maxwell, 880 S.W.2d at 466.

Reviewing the Crossland opinion is helpful in understanding the extent of the pre-1970 defense to liability. This case arose out of an accident involving a boat striking a bridge across a lake, killing the driver and passenger. Crossland, 781 S.W.2d at 430. The bridge was designed and built prior to January 1, 1970. Plaintiffs argued that their cause of action was based on an act or omission that occurred after the effective date of the TCA, namely the defendant’s failure to take some action on the night of the accident. The court rejected this contention by first reiterating that a claimant “may not state a claim under the Tort Claims Act for any defect in the bridge or reservoir because any such defect would be due to an act or omission that occurred before 1970....” *Id.* at 431. The Fort Worth court then went on to deal with the more difficult question of whether there is a duty to warn or make safe a dangerous condition resulting from a pre-1970 design. The court found that the failure to take action after 1970 could not form the basis of a claim under the TCA.

When the bridge and reservoir were completed the State did not provide instructions, lights, warnings, signs or barriers, so these omissions occurred before 1970. After 1970, the State continued to leave undone the installation of warnings, so the omissions continued to exist, but appellees have not identified any new act or omission that occurred after 1970.

*Id.* at 432; Valdez, 869 S.W.2d at 446-47 (rejecting the argument that the date of the injury is the date of the act or omission).

Requiring a governmental occupant to improve and/or warn of defects on premises constructed before the effective date of the TCA, would render section 101.061 meaningless.

The Texas Supreme Court has not settled the question as to whether an “act or omission” means the actual building of a structure in dispute, including any warning signs or lighting. Nevertheless, the appellate courts that have addressed this question have stated that where claims concern a structure constructed prior to the Texas Tort Claims Act, the state has governmental immunity.... Clearly article 101.061 intended to provide for abolishment of governmental immunity without causing havoc. Subjecting the state to liability for structures built prior to the act places the state in an unfair position of trying to analyze every structure under its control

and then rebuild, redesign and make safe all of those structures quick enough in order to protect the state from liability.

Chapman v. City of Houston, 839 S.W.2d 95, 99 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist] 1992, writ denied); Valdez, 869 S.W.2d at 446-47. See also Payne II, 772 S.W.2d at 475-78 (while there is a duty to maintain a structure as it was built, there is no duty under the TCA to redesign and add new features to update the old design). In short, requiring post-1970 modifications or other actions would obviate the purpose for section 101.061. *Id.* After all, what would be served by a provision that precludes liability for structures built before 1970 when the defendant can be held liable for failing to improve the pre-1970 design? See *id.*

The courts of appeals have consistently followed this rationale in refusing to predicate liability based upon the failure to improve premises completed before 1970. The following is a list of cases in which the plaintiff’s claims were held to be barred based upon the pre-1970 defense:

- (a) Defendant is not liable for failing to add lights and warning devices to bridges constructed before effective date of the TCA. Crossland, 781 S.W.2d at 431-33.
- (b) Suit could not be based upon a university’s failure to add a warning track in the outfield of a baseball field constructed before 1970. Valdez, 869 S.W.2d at 446-47.
- (c) Defendant could not be required to add guardrail to roadway completed before 1970. Stanford v. State Dep’t of Highways and Pub. Transp., 635 S.W.2d 581 (Tex.App.—Dallas 1982, writ ref’d n.r.e.).
- (d) Failure to improve median fence divider between oncoming lanes of traffic could not be the basis of liability for highway constructed before 1970. Burnett, 694 S.W.2d at 211-12. See Maxwell, 880 S.W.2d at 466.

b. Post-1970 Actions Must Have Caused the Premises Defect.

When a governmental unit does work after the effective date of the TCA, courts look to whether the post-1970 actions contributed to the premise defect in order to determine if liability can be attached. The fact that some work was done after January 1970 does not automatically waive the defense created by section 101.061. When construction is completed prior to January 1, 1970, and where there have not been structural changes that affected the condition that caused the injury, the state retains sovereign immunity. Valdez, 869 S.W.2d at 446-47. For example, in Shives, the Highway Department did maintenance work and made some slight design changes to the street where the

accident occurred after 1970. Shives, 743 S.W.2d at 716. The court found the post-1970 work did not cause or contribute to the accident. *Id.* The El Paso Court of Appeals held that the actions of which plaintiffs complained all occurred before the effective date of the TCA and could not be the basis of governmental liability. *Id.*; Maxwell, 880 S.W.2d at 466 (failure to upgrade or improve the safety features of a culvert during a highway renovation in 1979 did not constitute an act or omission occurring after 1970). See Barron, 880 S.W.2d at 302 (plaintiff could not point to any maintenance after the effective date of the TCA which contributed to the collision); Crossland, 781 S.W.2d at 431-34 (plaintiffs could not identify any actions taken after 1970, thus their suit was predicated upon acts or omissions which predated the TCA and were excluded from liability). Similarly, renovations or work on one part of a premises did not obligate a governmental entity to add warning devices and safety features to another portion of the premises. Maxwell, 880 S.W.2d at 463 (renovations to the roadway did not obligate the Highway Department to make improvements in the safety features or warning devices for an adjacent culvert).

On the other hand, a governmental entity can be held liable if, after January 1970, it did work that contributed to the accident. See Villarreal, 810 S.W.2d at 421. Furthermore, actions taken after 1970, may give rise to a continuing obligation to act. The Dallas Court of Appeals has held that once a governmental entity erects signs or warning devices after 1970, it can be liable for the negligent construction or maintenance of those items, regardless of the age of the roadway where they were installed. *Id.* But see Tarrant Reg’l Water Dist. v. Johnson, No. 17-0095, 62 Tex. Sup. Ct. J. 747, 2019 Tex. LEXIS 374 (Apr. 12, 2019). In Johnson, the Texas Supreme Court held that discretionary act exemption to liability under the TCA cannot be vitiated by a claim of failure to maintain where the decision to maintain is discretionary. *Id.* “[Defendant’s] failure to make the judgments [regarding repairs] the [plaintiffs] claim it should have made about the proper allocation of taxpayer resources is the kind of “policy decision[] committed to the other branches of government” that section 101.056 shields from judicial second-guessing.” *Id.* at 670 (internal quotation omitted).

c. The Age of the Premises, However, Does Not Excuse a Lack of Maintenance.

Finally, the pre-1970 defense does not create a shield from liability for failing to “maintain” the premises. Tex. Parks & Wildlife Dep’t, 988 S.W.2d at 372. All governmental units have an obligation to maintain property and to warn of dangerous conditions such as pot holes, regardless of the age of the structure involved. Smith v. State, 716 S.W.2d at 179-80;

McBride, 601 S.W.2d at 556-58. See Davis, 988 S.W.2d at 372.

The Davis decision demonstrates how a governmental entity can be held liable for failing to maintain a structure built before 1970. 988 S.W.2d at 372. The plaintiff was injured when a concrete park bench collapsed under him. It was uncontested that the bench had been built before 1970. However, in December 1991, the Department’s legal counsel recommended an inspection of all concrete benches in the park system and removal of unsafe benches. The bench in question was identified as a bench needing replacement, yet was never replaced. The Austin court held that the “failure to reduce or eliminate the dangerous condition posed by the cracks [in the bench] constitutes acts” after 1970 for which the Department could be held liable under the TCA. *Id.* at 373.

At the same time, the duty to maintain is limited to the work necessary to preserve the original design. Barron, 880 S.W.2d at 302; Villarreal, 810 S.W.2d at 421; Shives, 743 S.W.2d at 716; Burnett, 694 S.W.2d at 212. Thus, maintaining property does not require making improvements to the original design. Villarreal, 810 S.W.2d at 421; Payne II, 772 S.W.2d at 475-78. See Burnett, 694 S.W.2d at 212.

2. Section 101.055: Immunity For Tax Collection, Reponding to Emergency Call or Emergency Situation and Provision of Police and Fire Protection.

The TCA recognizes that there are certain governmental functions that should not be subject to scrutiny and second guessing by the courts. See Terrell, 588 S.W.2d at 787; Ross v. City of Houston, 807 S.W.2d 336, 337-38 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1990, writ denied). Therefore, the Legislature has provided that suits cannot be premised upon the assessment or collection of taxes, or the method of providing police and fire protection. See Driskill v. State, 787 S.W.2d 369 (Tex. 1990); Terrell, 588 S.W.2d at 787. This section retains immunity only for the formulation of policy related to tax collection and police/fire protection, but not for the negligent implementation of a policy. Ryder Integrated Logistics, Inc., 453 S.W.3d at 298928; Petta v. Rivera, 985 S.W.2d 199, 206 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1998) rev’d on other grounds, 44 S.W.3d 575 (Tex. 2001); Driskill, 787 S.W.2d at 370; Terrell, 588 S.W.2d at 787; Orozco v. Dallas Morning News, Inc., 975 S.W.2d 392, 397 (Tex.App.—Dallas 1998, no pet.); Riggs, 177 F.R.D. at 405; Ross, 807 S.W.2d at 337-38; Poncar v. City of Mission, 797 S.W.2d 236 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1990, no writ); City of Dallas v. Cox, 793 S.W.2d 701 (Tex.App.—Dallas 1990, no writ); Robinson v. City of San Antonio, 727 S.W.2d at 40. If the negligence that is the basis of suit lies in the formulation of policy, the complaint is with how police protection is provided, and

the City remains immune from liability. Orozco, 975 S.W.2d at 397; Riggs, 177 F.R.D. at 406. Accordingly, a governmental body cannot be held liable for deciding to utilize radar to pursue speeders, its policy regarding monitoring extinguished fires, or its policy of inspecting fire hydrants. Terrell, 588 S.W.2d at 787; Ryder Integrated Logistics, Inc., 453 S.W.3d at 298928; Poncar, 797 S.W.2d at 237; Ross, 807 S.W.2d at 337–38.

This section also retains sovereign immunity for actions of employees who are responding to emergency calls or emergency situations, so long as they comply with all applicable laws, or in the absence thereof, do not act with conscious indifference or reckless disregard for the safety of others. Borrego, 964 S.W.2d at 958; City of Arlington v. Whitaker, 977 S.W.2d 742, 744—45 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 1998, pet. denied); TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.055(2). This provision also seeks to insure that employees and agents providing emergency care are not second guessed. City of Amarillo v. Martin, 971 S.W.2d 426, 430-31 (Tex.1998) (“To recover damages resulting from the emergency operation of an emergency vehicle, a plaintiff must show that the operator has committed an act that the operator knew or should have known posed a high degree of risk of serious injury”). This requires showing more than a momentary judgment lapse—it requires showing that the driver has committed an act he knew or should have known posed a high degree of risk of serious injury. *Id.* at 429-30; City of Pasadena v. Kuhn, 260 S.W.3d 93, 99 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2008, no pet.).

When the governmental unit raises the emergency exception, the plaintiff has the burden to raise disputed fact issues as to whether the actions were taken in response to an emergency, violated applicable laws, and were reckless. City of San Antonio v. Hartman, 201 S.W.3d 667, 672 (Tex. 2006); Tex. Dep’t of Pub. Safety v. Little, 259 S.W.3d 236, 238-39 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2008, no pet.). Making a routine traffic stop does not qualify as responding to an emergency situation. See Texas Dept. of Public Safety v. Rodriguez, 344 S.W.3d 483, 496 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2011, no pet.). However, pursuing an actively dangerous driver, such as a motorcyclist operating without lights or a speeding driver who was making multiple lane changes and disobeying traffic control devices, may constitute an emergency for purposes of the emergency exception. City of Hous. v. Collins, 515 S.W.3d 467 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2017, no pet.) (need to respond to motorcyclist driving without lights and standing on vehicle was valid emergency for exception); Texas Dep’t of Pub. Safety v. Bonilla, 2014 WL 2451176 (Tex.App—El Paso May 30, 2014), *rev’d on other grounds* 481 S.W.3d 640 (Tex. 2015).

When the provision of emergency service does not meet the standards established by a municipal

procedures manual or relevant state rules and statutes, a governmental unit can be held liable for the actions of its agents and employees. Mejia v. City of San Antonio, 759 S.W.2d 198, 199–200 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 1988, no pet.). Thus, the provision of emergency, medical, or other services must meet established standards. *Id.* Additionally, where officer pursuing a suspect did not remove his foot from his vehicle’s accelerator pedal until .5 seconds before impact; was distracted by turning on his in-car camera as he entered the intersection and thus was not “fully aware of his surroundings;” and there was a building to the side of the direction from which plaintiff was traveling that “created a sight restriction interfering with officer’s ability to fully observe all vehicles at the intersection he was approaching a fact issue existed whether the officer was acting conscious indifference or reckless disregard. Bonilla, 2014 WL 2451176, at \*6. However, where officer was responding to a call to a scene by his SWAT team commander he was responding to a call for emergency services. Quested v. City of Houston, 440 S.W.3d 275, 285 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2014, no pet.). See also City of San Antonio v. Rosenbaum, 2011 WL 6739583, \*3 (Tex.App.—San Antonio Dec. 21, 2011, no pet.) (mem. op.) (even if officer subjectively did not believe he was on-duty at the time of the accident, his belief would not change the nature of the call to which he was responding). Additionally, fact that an officer was exceeding tollway speed limit by driving 60 miles per hour, but keep proper look-out and steered to avoid accident, established he did not act with conscious indifference or reckless disregard to others. Quested v. City of Houston, 440 S.W.3d 274, 285-86. See, e.g., City of Pasadena v. Kuhn, 260 S.W.3d 93, 99–100 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2008, no pet.) (holding that officer’s actions in entering intersection with activated lights and siren to respond to house fire were not taken with conscious disregard or reckless indifference to safety when officer slowed down before entering intersection and colliding with plaintiff); Pakdimounivong v. City of Arlington, 219 S.W.3d 401, 411–12 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 2006, pet. denied) (holding that officers’ actions were not taken with conscious indifference or reckless disregard for safety of deceased when no evidence showed that officers did not care what happened to deceased); City of San Angelo Fire Dep’t v. Hudson, 179 S.W.3d 695, 701–02 (Tex.App.—Austin 2005, no pet.) (concluding there was no evidence of reckless disregard for safety of others when officer drove into intersection without stopping and witness did not hear brakes being applied). The mere fact that governmental employees began responding to an emergency does not mean all of their actions are automatically exempt from liability. See Borrego, 964 S.W.2d at 958 (EMS immobilized Borrego by strapping him to backboard; Borrego, was later hit by car because he could not get out of the car’s

way). The El Paso court held that the emergency technicians were not responding to an emergency when they tied Borrego to the backboard and left him in the street. *Id.* Thus, the City could be held liable for the negligence of the emergency medical technicians. *Id.*

Governmental entities, however, do not enjoy immunity from claims arising from tax collection, or the police and fire protection, if the Act or other statute creates liability. To illustrate, a premises liability claim can be brought against a county for injuries sustained while in a tax assessor/collector office. Dowlearn, 489 S.W.2d at 146-47. Likewise, a governmental entity can be held liable for the negligent operation of a motor vehicle by a police officer. County of Brazoria v. Radtke, 566 S.W.2d 326, 328-29 (Tex. Civ. App.—Beaumont 1978, writ ref’d n.r.e.); Guzman, 766 S.W.2d at 860. More importantly though, governmental entities can be subject to claims brought under other statutes waiving sovereign immunity. See Cox, 793 S.W.2d at 726-28. The Cox plaintiffs brought suit under both the TCA and Section 1983 of the United States Code. They were able to maintain suit under §1983 without regard to any provisions of the TCA or defendants being on duty police officers. See *id.*

### 3. Section 101.062: Limits on Liability for Provision of 9-1-1 Services

Section 101.062 controls and limits liability of governmental entities that provide 9-1-1 services. Section 101.062 “applies to a claim against a public agency that arises from an action of an employee of the public agency or a volunteer under direction of the public agency and that involves providing 9-1-1 service or responding to a 9-1-1 emergency call only if the action violates a statute or ordinance applicable to the action.” TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE ANN. § 101.062(b) (West 2011). Under section 101.062, when providing emergency services, a governmental entity waives immunity only when the action of its agents “violates a statute or ordinance applicable to the action.” Guillen v. City of San Antonio, 13 S.W.3d 428, 434 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 2000, pet. denied); Fernandez v. City of El Paso, 876 S.W.2d 370, 376 (Tex. App.—El Paso 1993, writ denied); TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE ANN. § 101.062(b).

In order to form the basis of a claim under this section of the TCA, the statutes or ordinances at issue must set standards of care applicable to the provision of care or services. Guillen, 13 S.W.3d at 434; Fernandez, 876 S.W.2d at 376. In Guillen, the court concluded that the standard medical operating procedures of the San Antonio fire department were “guidelines” rather than a statute or ordinance to which section 101.062 applied. See Guillen, 13 S.W.3d at 433–34. In both Guillen and Fernandez, the courts concluded that the statutes and ordinances pleaded did not impose affirmative duties on

the emergency responders that were violated. See Guillen, 13 S.W.3d at 433–34 (Medical Practice Act does not affirmatively impose duty on paramedics to yield authority to physician as alleged by plaintiffs); Fernandez, 876 S.W.2d at 376 (provisions of Health and Safety Code and City of El Paso municipal code pleaded by appellants did not impose affirmative duty on appellee to respond to emergency situation within certain period of time).

The Supreme Court of Texas’s expansion of the causal nexus requirement provides further difficulties with alleging liability on the basis of provision of emergency services. In Sanchez, plaintiffs alleged that city personnel’s failure to adequately respond to a 9-1-1 call violated city ordinances setting forth employee standards of conduct. 494 S.W.3d at 724. On review, the Supreme Court of Texas did not reach the question of whether the alleged ordinances established standards for care that would be actionable under 101.062(b), but rather decided that the pleadings did not establish proximate cause as a matter of law. *Id.* at 727. Given that many emergency services are only provided when someone is already at risk of injury or death, the burden to show that the emergency service providers are the proximate cause of the injury will be very high.

### 4. Section 101.056: Exclusions for Exercising Discretionary Powers.

Section 101.056 of the Act entitled “Discretionary Powers,” provides:

[The TCA] does not apply to a claim based on:

- (1) the failure of a governmental unit to perform an act that the unit is not required by law to perform; or
- (2) a governmental unit’s decision not to perform an act or on its failure to make a decision on the performance or nonperformance of an act if the law leaves the performance or nonperformance of the act to the discretion of the governmental unit.

TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE ANN. § 101.056 (West 2005). The discretionary powers exemptions, embodied in §101.056, extend policymaking immunity beyond the assessment of taxes and method of providing policy and fire protection contained in section 101.055. The purpose of this exception is to avoid judicial review of governmental policy decisions. Loyd, 956 S.W.2d at 123; Golden Harvest, 942 S.W.2d at 686-87; Bennett v. Tarrant County Water Control and Improvement Dist. No. 1, 894 S.W.2d at 452. A governmental entity cannot be held liable for policy decisions, regardless of the activity involved. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.056. The exclusion applies to failure to act and omissions, as well as positive acts of governments. Bellnoa, 894

S.W.2d at n.3. However, “once a government has decided to perform a discretionary act, the act must be performed in a nonnegligent manner.” Cortez, 925 S.W.2d at 149-50.

Unfortunately, there is no bright line test for when an activity is a discretionary decision made at the policymaking level as opposed to decisions regarding the implementation of policies that are made at the operational level. Ryder Integrated Logistics, Inc., 453 S.W.3d at 298; City of Fort Worth v. Gay, 977 S.W.2d 814, 817 (Tex.App.–Fort Worth 1998, no pet.). The courts use different tests for determining if a decision is a discretionary act and thereby excluded from the TCA’s waiver of immunity. Stephen F. Austin v. Flynn, 228 S.W.3d 653 (Tex. 2007). The courts seek to determine whether the plaintiff’s complaints are with policy level decision as opposed to the implementation of policy decisions. *Id.*; Bennett, 894 S.W.2d at 452. But see Tarrant Reg’l Water Dist. v. Johnson, No. 17-0095, 62 Tex. Sup. Ct. J. 747, 2019 Tex. LEXIS 374 (Apr. 12, 2019)(cannot circumvent discretionary act exclusion from liability under the TAC even when it affects maintenance if its based on whether to budget money for maintenance versus other activities.).

Some courts attempt to focus on whether the matter requires exercising judgment that is discretionary, as opposed to carrying out an obligation mandated by law in which nothing is left to the discretion of the officer. State v. Rodriguez, 985 S.W.2d at 85; City of Lancaster v. Chambers, 883 S.W.2d 650, 654 (Tex. 1994); Loyd, 956 S.W.2d at 124. At the same time, the exercise of judgment by a manager does not always fall within the ambit of the discretionary act protection. Davis, 988 S.W.2d at 374 (park manager’s decision not to remove bench was implementation of policy level decision for which Department could be held liable).

Cases addressing the discretionary exemption from liability break down into two categories. The first set of cases addresses general governmental functions, while the second focuses on discretion in the design, construction, maintenance of roadways, bridges, and highways.

#### a. Discretionary Governmental Decisions.

Governmental entities cannot be held liable for policymaking decisions or decisions made at a policymaking level. They are liable only for the negligent implementation of policy, sometimes referred to as operational level decisions. Flynn, 228 S.W.3d 653; Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Andrews, 155 S.W.3d 351 (Tex.App.–Fort Worth 2005, pet. denied) (citing Mogayzel v. Tex. Dep’t of Transp., 66 S.W.3d 459, 465 (Tex.App.–Fort Worth 2001, pet. denied)). The courts have held that the following decisions are a reflection of governmental policy and, therefore, cannot form the basis of liability:

- (a) A university’s decision to hold classes in inclement weather. Univ. of Tex. v. Akers, 607 S.W.2d 283 (Tex. Civ. App.–Fort Worth 1980, writ ref’d n.r.e.);
- (b) The decision of whether or not to purchase insurance for a city. Westbrook v. City of Edna, 552 S.W.2d 608 (Tex. Civ. App.–Corpus Christi 1977, writ ref’d n.r.e.);
- (c) Decision regarding the training and supervision of personnel. Radtke, 566 S.W.2d at 330;
- (d) The decision to have a kitchen in a county jail. Norton v. Brazos, 640 S.W.2d 690, 693 (Tex.App.–Houston [14th Dist.] 1982, no writ);
- (e) The decision to raise a speed limit. Bellnoa, 894 S.W.2d at 827;
- (f) Decisions regarding the placement of a stop sign, subject to the provisions of §101.060. Miller v. City of Fort Worth, 893 S.W.2d 27, 32-32 (Tex.App.–Fort Worth 1994, pet. dismissed by agr.) (citing Shives, 743 S.W.2d at 714);
- (g) Decision regarding performing an inquest. Tarrant County v. Dobbins, 919 S.W.2d at 877;
- (h) Decision whether to retrofit school buses with “Stop Sign” arms, even if new buses are required to have them. Cortez, 925 S.W.2d at 149-150; and
- (i) Decision to have an “open door” policy at mental health facility. Marroquin, 927 S.W.2d at 232.
- (j) Decision on whether or not to add corrosion inhibitors to a water supply. Loyd, 956 S.W.2d at 124; and
- (k) Decisions on timing and quantity of release of water from dam or reservoir. Golden Harvest, 942 S.W.2d at 686; Bennett, 894 S.W.2d at 452.
- (l) Decisions regarding design of a stage and theater. Gates, 2004 WL 2559937 at \*3.
- (m) Auditing city records. City of Roman Forest v. Stockman, 141 S.W.3d 805, 811 (Tex.App.–Beaumont 2004, no pet.).

Decisions in carrying out policy, however, are not exempt from liability. Therefore, governmental units have been held liable for negligent implementation of policy as illustrated by:

- (a) A police officer’s negligent operation of his patrol car while pursuing a speeder causing plaintiff’s injuries. Terrell, 588 S.W.2d at 790; see Ryder Integrated Logistics, Inc., 453 S.W.3d at 298 (officer negligently shining

spotlight and headlights into oncoming traffic after making a traffic stop);

- (b) A director’s decision to use a glass as a prop in a school play. Christilles v. Sw. Tex. State Univ., 639 S.W.2d 38, 43 (Tex.App.–Austin 1982, writ ref’d n.r.e.);
- (c) Operation, use, and maintenance of kitchen equipment in county jail. Norton, 640 S.W.2d at 63;
- (d) The manner in which a public work is constructed. Mitchell v. City of Dallas, 855 S.W.2d 741 (Tex.App.–Dallas 1993), aff’d, 870 S.W.2d 21 (Tex. 1994);
- (e) Decision not to remove cracked park bench. Davis, 988 S.W.2d at 374;
- (f) Failure to maintain public works. Gay, 977 S.W.2d at 817; and
- (g) Unreasonable delay in making improvements to traffic signals or warning devices approved by city council. Zambory v. City of Dallas, 838 S.W.2d 580, 582-83 (Tex.App. –Dallas 1992, writ denied).
- (h) Decisions regarding when and where to run sprinklers on campus. Flynn, 228 S.W.3d 653.

Thus, whether something constitutes a discretionary matter is determined by whether it is a policy level decision or a decision regarding the implementation of policy made at an operational level. Terrell, 588 S.W.2d at 790.

b. Discretion in the Design and Construction of Roadways and Other Public Works.

Twice in 1999 the Texas Supreme Court made it clear that the design of roads, bridges, and highways, and decisions regarding improvement of public works are policy level decisions under §101.056. “Decisions about highway design and about the type of safety features to install are discretionary policy decisions.” State v. Miguel, 2 S.W.3d 249, 251 (Tex. 1999); see Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Arzate, 159 S.W.3d 188 (Tex.App.–El Paso 2004, no pet.). “Design of any public work, such as a roadway, is a discretionary function involving many policy decisions, and the governmental entity responsible may not be sued for such decisions.” State v. Rodriguez, 985 S.W.2d at 85; see Andrews, 155 S.W.3d at 358; Harris County v. Demny, 886 S.W.2d 330, 335-36 (Tex.App.–Houston [1st Dist.] 1994, pet. denied); Maxwell, 880 S.W.2d at 463 (“[a] governmental entity’s discretion in the design of roads and bridges, which includes the installation of safety features such as guardrails and barricades, is protected from liability by section 101.056(2) of the Tort Claims Act”); Shives, 743 S.W.2d at 717; Burnett, 694 S.W.2d at 212; Stanford, 635 S.W.2d at 582. But see Likes, 962 S.W.2d at 501 (while city’s pre-1970

decision on whether to construct public improvements are exercises of governmental powers for which it cannot be held liable, construction and maintenance of a storm sewer before 1970 was a proprietary for which the City could be held liable); Adams, 888 S.W.2d at 614 (city could be liable for pre-1987 design of public works, because before the 1987 amendments, design was a proprietary function for which cities could be held liable). Specifically, suit cannot be based upon:

- (a) Dangerous condition arising from the design of a highway. Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Ramsey, 74 S.W.3d 864, 867 (Tex. 2002).
- (b) Dangerous condition that arises from the government’s regulation of traffic and parking, and the width of traffic lanes or the width of streets. Palmer, 607 S.W.2d at 300;
- (c) The design of an overpass. City of El Paso v. Ayoub, 787 S.W.2d 553 (Tex.App.–El Paso 1990, writ denied);
- (d) Decision regarding whether or not to install guardrails, erect barricade, warning sign, or similar warning devices. Barron, 880 S.W.2d at 302; Wenzel v. City of New Braunfels, 852 S.W.2d 97, 98 (Tex.App.–Austin 1993, no writ); Stanford, 635 S.W.2d at 582; and
- (e) Decision on whether to improve or upgrade a roadway, or change median barrier. Crossland, 781 S.W.2d at 432-33; Burnett, 694 S.W.2d at 212. But see Zambory v. City of Dallas, 838 S.W.2d 580 (Tex.App.–Dallas 1992, writ denied) (area of potential liability for negligent implementation of a design).
- (f) Decision on whether to add safety devices or warning signals to a culvert located off a roadway is discretionary. Maxwell, 880 S.W.2d at 463-64.
- (g) Decision on whether to raise or lower the speed limit is discretionary. Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Phillips, 153 S.W.3d 121, 123 (Tex.App.–Beaumont 2004, no pet.); Bellnoa, 894 S.W.2d at 827; Shives, 743 S.W.2d at 715. But see Garza v. State, 878 S.W.2d 671 (Tex.App.–Corpus Christi 1994, no writ) (45 mile-per-hour speed limit sign misled the public into believing that it was reasonable and safe to drive 45 miles-per-hour when the speed was actually excessive for that portion of the roadway).
- (h) Design of roadway detours. State v. Rodriguez, 985 S.W.2d at 85-86.
- (i) Decisions regarding materials to use to warn of premises defects. Miguel, 2 S.W.3d at 250-51.
- (j) Preliminary approval of changes to roadway was not a final decision and entity was exercising discretion in determining whether

to go forward with changes and/or the types of changes to make. Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Garrison, 121 S.W.3d 808 (Tex.App. – Beaumont 2003, no pet.).

- (k) Decision to widen only a portion of bridge was discretionary. Sanchez v. Matagorda County, 124 S.W.3d 350 Tex.App. –Corpus Christi 2003, no pet.).
- (l) Failure to create left turn lane. Phillips, 153 S.W.3d at 123.

Allegations that the governmental entity should be interested in building a “safe” premises does not get around the discretionary act exemption. Crossland, 781 S.W.2d at 433.

Appellees do not identify any law which required appellants to warn boaters of the bridge. Instead, they argue each appellant made a policy decision to warn of danger because each appellant has posted other warnings, e.g., clearance signs on highway bridges. Therefore, appellees argue the policy decision was to warn of danger and the decision not to light the bridge was an operational one. Doubtless, the state desires to make Texas a safer place, but this general policy goal does not make the state liable for all possible failures to warn. The State will make the civic policy decisions about the design of State projects such as whether to include lights in the design. *Id.*

Finally, the Supreme Court’s ruling in Ramirez makes it clear that even if the design of a roadway creates a dangerous condition, there is no duty to warn of the condition because to do so would allow a governmental entity to be held liable for a discretionary act. Ramirez, 74 S.W.3d at 867.

c. Decisions Involving the Design of Roadways Constitute Policy Level Decisions.

In interpreting section 101.056(2) of the TCA, the courts have distinguished between policy level decisions and professional or occupational discretion involved in the implementation of policy level decisions. Maxwell, 880 S.W.2d at 464; Eakle v. Tex. Dep’t of Human Serv., 815 S.W.2d 869, 874 (Tex.App.–Austin 1991, writ denied). Only policy level decisions are protected from liability by section 101.056(2). Maxwell, 880 S.W.2d at 464. Professional or occupational discretion applied in the implementation of policy level decisions is not protected from liability by the “discretionary act” exemption created by section 101.056(2). Christilles, 639 S.W.2d at 42. In the Maxwell opinion, however, the Austin Court of Appeals found that roadway design decisions inherently

involved policy level decisions that are exempt from liability under the TCA.

In her first point of error [appellant] insists that the trial court erred in granting summary judgment based on immunity for discretionary acts because the Department’s decisions regarding the placement of the culvert and its safety features involve professional or occupational discretion not protected by section 101.056(2) [of the Texas Tort Claims Act]. ... We disagree.

Actions involving occupational or professional discretion are devoid of policy implications. Examples include decisions made in driving a mail truck, ... or the decisions by drama instructor to use a glass rather than a plastic prop in a university production.

Decisions regarding the design of a highway and the installation of safety features, however, do not fall in this category. It is not proper for a court to second-guess the agency’s decisions that some other type of marker or safety device would have been more appropriate ..., or that the culvert was placed too close to the highway. To do so would displace the authority of the agency responsible for making such decisions.

Contrary to [appellant’s] argument a “professional,” such as an engineer may use his or her skills in designing adequate safety features for a highway without subjecting the process to judicial review as an occupational or professional class of agency action. Thus, even though the Department may have used engineering expertise and discretion in the planning and design of the culvert, the action remains in the informed discretion of the agency and exempt from liability under section 101.056(2) [of the TCA].

Maxwell, 880 S.W.2d at 464.

d. The Duty to Maintain is not Discretionary.

Again, the discretionary act defense does not excuse a defendant’s failure to maintain the premises. Maintenance of roadways and other premises is a ministerial and non-discretionary duty. Tex. Parks & Wildlife Dep’t, 988 S.W.2d at 374; Gay, 977 S.W.2d at 817; Sutton, 549 S.W.2d at 62. Governmental units will be held liable for the failure to properly maintain public roadways. Davis, 988 S.W.2d at 374; Gay, 977 S.W.2d at 817; Sutton, 549 S.W.2d at 62. Therefore, a

governmental defendant can be held liable for potholes on a roadway, even if the original decision regarding the design of the premises are exempt from liability. *See id.*; *see also* Sullivan, 33 S.W.3d at 13-15; Sutton, 549 S.W.2d at 62. The non-discretionary obligation of maintenance, however, does not include a duty to redesign, improve, or add safety features to the roadway. Crossland, 781 S.W.2d at 433-34; Burnett, 694 S.W.2d at 211-12. Thus, the ministerial duty of maintenance requires only the preservation of the premises as originally designed and constructed. Arzate, 159 S.W.3d at 192; Stanford, 635 S.W.2d at 582.

Recently the Texas Supreme Court rejected a claim of liability for failure to maintain where the decision to maintain was discretionary. Tarrant Reg’l Water Dist. v. Johnson, No. 17-0095, 62 Tex. Sup. Ct. J. 747, 2019 Tex. LEXIS 374 (Apr. 12, 2019). Johnson brought suit complaining of the District’s failure to maintain a kayak shoot through a bridge. Brandy Johnson attempted to cross the Clear Fork of the Trinity River in Fort Worth by walking across Trinity Park Dam No. 2. In the middle of the dam is a ten-foot-wide kayak chute, where the river flows through the dam. Brandy lost her footing on the dam, slipped into the river, and drowned. Her parents sued the Tarrant Regional Water District, which constructed and maintains the dam. *Id.* The Johnsons alleged that, because of the failure to maintain the dam, the kayak chute was slippery and that the current running through it was deceptively dangerous and difficult to see. *Id.* The Court held that a “failure to maintain” claim cannot circumvent the discretionary act exemption from liability under the TCA. *Id.* “District’s failure to make the judgments the Johnsons claim it should have made about the proper allocation of taxpayer resources is the kind of policy decision committed to the other branches of government that section 101.056 shields from judicial second-guessing. *Id.* at 670 (internal quotations omitted).

e. Is There an Obligation to Warn of or Make Design Defects Safe?

Although there are no cases that address this issue, governmental premises occupants should not be obligated to warn of or make safe dangerous conditions resulting from discretionary acts. It could be argued that governmental entities should be obligated to warn of dangerous conditions even if they result from a discretionary act that is exempt from liability. Allowing such a claim, however, would void the purpose of the defense established by §101.056. Clearly, the purpose of the discretionary act defense was to allow governmental entities to carry out certain actions and conditions without concern for liability. Allowing liability to be predicated upon the failure to warn of a condition resulting from a discretionary act would void the very purpose of this section of the TCA. *See also* Demny, 886 S.W.2d at 335-36 (O’Connor, J.,

dissenting). Section 101.056 would be meaningless if a governmental entity could not be held liable for the design of a roadway, but could be sued based upon the failure to warn of the width of traffic lanes, or the absence of guardrails.

f. Determining Whether a Decision Falls Within the Discretionary Act Exclusion From Liability is a Question of Law.

The question of whether an act or omission is discretionary is a question of law for the court to decide. Sullivan, 33 S.W.3d at 13-14; Miguel, 2 S.W.3d at 251; State v. Rodriguez, 985 S.W.2d at 85. Accordingly, many cases involving discretionary governmental decisions are resolved through summary judgment. *See* Bellnoa, 894 S.W.2d at 827; Maxwell, 880 S.W.2d 463-64; Barron, 880 S.W.2d at 302; Stanford, 635 S.W.2d at 582; Burnett, 694 S.W.2d at 212.

5. Section 101.021: Exclusion From Liability for Property Damage Resulting From Premises Defects.

Property damage cannot be recovered in a premises liability case under the TCA. A governmental entity is not liable under the TCA for property damage caused by a premise defect. Winkenhower, 875 S.W.2d at 388; DeAnda v. County of El Paso, 581 S.W.2d 795 (Tex. Civ. App.–El Paso 1979, no writ). A plaintiff is not allowed to recover property damage in a premises liability case regardless of whether the dangerous condition that caused the damage is characterized as an ordinary premise defect or a “special defect.” Pruitt, 770 S.W.2d at 638. Winkenhower, 875 S.W.2d at 388 (no liability where property damage was caused by a pothole in the roadway). Under the TCA, recovery for property damage is available only when the property damage is caused by the negligence of a governmental employee in the operation of motor driven equipment or a motor vehicle. *Id.* (vehicle must be operated by governmental employee or agent, not the plaintiff); Pruitt, 770 S.W.2d at 639; TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.021(1). *But see* Morgan, 882 S.W.2d at 490 (governmental entity need not own the motor driven vehicle, it need only be controlled or directed by a governmental employee).

6. Section 101.057: Exclusion for Civil Disobedience and Certain Intentional Torts.

Governmental units cannot be held liable for actions taken in response to large scale civil disobedience. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT §101.057(a). “The Texas Tort Claims Act waives governmental immunity for certain negligent conduct, but it does not waive immunity for claims arising out of intentional torts, such as battery. City of Watauga v. Gordon, 434 S.W.3d 589, 593-94 (Tex. 2014).



The Act’s exclusions of claims connected with civil disobedience or riots was intended to preclude liability for injuries resulting from efforts to control riots, as well as to exclude liability for governmental decisions on how to control a riot or whether to control it at all. Terrell, 588 S.W.2d at 786-87. Thus, actions taken in response to a fire started in a jail by a prisoner were actions in response to civil disobedience and injuries resulting therefrom could not form the basis of suit. Forbes v. City of Denton, 595 S.W.2d 621, 623 (Tex. Civ. App.—Fort Worth 1980, writ ref’d n.r.e.). The civil disobedience exclusion was intended to encompass public commotions involving large numbers of persons acting unlawfully in concert. *Id.*; see City of Amarillo v. Langley, 651 S.W.2d 906 (Tex.App.—Amarillo 1983, no writ). Consequently, the actions of two motorcyclists did not constitute large scale civil disobedience and the City could be held liable for its handling of that matter. *Id.*

In Tex. Dep’t of Criminal Justice v. Rangel, 595 S.W.3d 198 (Tex. 2020), the Texas Supreme Court considered whether the use of a tear gas gun on several inmates that refused to return to their bunks qualified as a “riot” under the Act’s exclusion. See *id.* at 210. The Court looked to the ordinary meaning of the term “riot,” rather than deferring to the prison officials’ subjective determination of whether circumstances constituted a riot. *Id.* at 208–10. The Court noted that “an inmate’s noncompliance with official orders, by itself, does not necessarily constitute a riot,” but when multiple prisoners refused to obey orders and continued to threaten violence against one another, the undisputed evidence showed the riot exception applied. *Id.* at 210.

a. Section 101.057(a)’s Exclusion for Intentional Torts Does Not Refer to Intentional Torts Committed by Third-Parties.

The scope of §101.057’s exclusion from the waiver of immunity for intentional torts has been the subject of considerable debate and litigation for the last decade. The debate was brought to a head when the Fourteenth Court of Appeals rendered its decision in Delaney, holding that the University of Houston could not be held liable because the plaintiff’s claim involved an intentional tort (plaintiff was raped by an intruder in her dormitory room), and the Waco Court of Appeals’ holding in City of Waco v. Hester, that the City could be held liable because the employees’ negligence that involved the use of personal property allowed the intentional tort (an inmate on inmate sexual assault) to occur. Compare Delaney v. Univ. of Houston, 792 S.W.2d 733 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1990) *rev’d* 835 S.W.2d 56 (Tex. 1992) with City of Waco v. Hester, 805 S.W.2d 807, 810 (Tex.App.—Waco 1990, writ denied).

In the Rusk State Hospital decision, the Texas Supreme Court addressed whether a §101.057(2)

precluded a governmental entity to be held liable if one of its employees assisted an in-patient in a psychiatric hospital to commit suicide. Rusk State Hospital, 392 S.W.3d at 99-100. The Supreme Court noted that a person commits a crime if they act, “with intent to promote or assist the commission of suicide by another...” *Id.* The court also pointed out that a person commits a crime if they take actions with specific intent to inflict harm, such as would be the case with an intentional tort. *Id.* Based on the fact that intent was a required element of the crime of assisted suicide and that acting with intent to harm would constitute an intentional tort, the court rejected the plaintiffs’ argument that the hospital could be liable for the actions of an intern who committed murder or in assisted a psychiatric patient to commit suicide. *Id.* at 100.

The Supreme Court of Texas’s decision in Delaney dramatically limited the scope of §101.057(2) exclusion from the Act’s waiver of sovereign immunity. During her second semester at the University, Ms. Delaney noticed that an outside door to her dormitory was broken and that the door was often propped open to allow entry into the building. Concerned that the broken door lock and the practice of propping the door open would allow intruders easy access to the dormitory, Delaney and other students repeatedly complained to the University. The University disregarded the complaints and never repaired the lock. One night, an intruder entered the dormitory through the door with the broken lock and while holding Delaney and her boyfriend at gunpoint, raped Delaney in her room. *Id.*

Delaney brought various claims against the University, including claims that it failed to provide her a secure residence because it failed to repair the broken dormitory door lock. The trial court granted the University’s motion for summary judgment finding that Delaney’s claim was barred by the §101.057(2) exclusion from waiver of sovereign immunity for intentional torts. *Id.* at 58.

The Supreme Court began its analysis by focusing on the language of §101.057(2) of the Act to determine its intended scope. “[T]he Act’s waiver of immunity [does not extend] to claims ‘arising out of assault, battery, false imprisonment, or any other intentional tort.’” *Id.* at 59; see City of Dallas v. Rivera, 146 S.W.3d 334, 338 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2004, no pet.) (no waiver for use of pepper spray, handcuffs, K-9 police service dog). The University contended that any claim involving an intentional tort was precluded by §101.057(2). *Id.* The supreme court rejected this construction, saying that it was far too expansive.

We think that “arising out of” in [section 101.057(2)] ... requires a certain nexus for the provision to apply. In section 101.057(2), the nexus is between the claim and an intentional tort. In essence, section 101.057(2) excludes

from the Act’s waiver of immunity claims *for* intentional torts. That section ... does not state whether the tortfeasor must be the governmental employee or a third party. ... [W]e think that the more plausible reading of the provision is that the tortfeasor must be that the governmental employee whose conduct is the subject of the complaint.

*Id.* at 59 (emphasis in original). The supreme court was persuaded to following this interpretation and to reject the University’s argument for two reasons.

First, the court turned to the United States Supreme Court’s interpretation of a similar provision of the Federal Tort Claims Act that excludes from the waiver of federal immunity “any claim arising out of” assault, battery, or false imprisonment. In Sheridan v. U.S., 487 U.S. 392 (1988), the United States Supreme Court held that the intentional torts exclusion did not bar claims that arose from the negligence of federal employees in allowing the intentional tort to be committed. *Id.* The Texas Supreme Court quoted a portion of the Sheridan decision:

The words “any claim arising out of” an assault or battery [as contained in the Federal Tort Claims Act] are unquestionably broad enough to bar all claims based *entirely* on an assault or battery. The import of these words is less clear, however, when they are applied to a claim arising out of two tortious acts, one of which is an assault or battery and the other which is the mere act of negligence. *Id.* (emphasis in original).

The Texas Supreme Court then focused on the second basis for rejecting the University’s argument regarding the scope of 101.057(2)’s application.

The other reason we reach the conclusion we do is because it is more consistent with the legal principal that intentional conduct intervening between a negligent act and the result does not always vitiate liability for the negligence.

*Id.* at 60. The court noted that the Restatement (Second) of Torts, § 448 (1965) provides:

The act of a third person in committing an intentional tort is a superseding cause of harm to another resulting therefrom, although the actor’s negligent conduct created a situation which afforded an opportunity to the third party to commit such a tort or crime, unless the actor at the time of his negligent conduct realized or should have realized the likelihood

that such a situation might be created, and that a third person might avail himself of the opportunity to commit such a tort or crime.

*Id.* Thus the court concluded that to apply section 101.057(2) so broadly as to except from the Act’s waiver of immunity any claim for injuries resulting from an intentional tort, “is to ignore a distinction which the law recognizes when negligent and intentional acts both contribute to the occasion of injury. The better view, we believe, is a construction of section 101.057(2) which accommodates this distinction.” *Id.* Thus, the Texas Supreme Court reversed the take nothing judgment that had been entered based upon the University’s motion for summary judgment, because it found that Delaney’s claims were distinct and separate from the rape that she suffered. “The University’s alleged failure to repair the dormitory door lock and the alleged breach of contract to provide a secure residence for Delaney are readily distinguishable from the intruder’s conduct. ... Had an intruder gained entrance to Delaney’s dormitory through the broken door and injured her negligently rather than intentionally, the University could not invoke section 101.057(2) to avoid liability. We hold that it cannot do so in these circumstances either.” *Id.*

Following the supreme court’s decision in Delaney, it appeared that 101.057(2) applied only to intentional torts committed by governmental employees. In the eighth year since the issuance of the Delaney decision, the rationale of the court regarding whether the gravamen of the plaintiff’s complaint is the intentional tort, has been used to allow suits to be brought against governmental entities even when the intentional tort was committed by a governmental employee. Dillard v. Austin Indep. Sch. Dist., 806 S.W.2d 589, 592 (Tex.App.—Austin 1991, writ denied) v. Denton County, 119 F.3d 381, 389-90 (5th Cir. 1997). But see Petta, 44 S.W.3d 575, at 4; Henry, 52 S.W.3d 434, \*4.

The Downey case arose from the rape of a jail inmate by an employee of the Denton County Sheriff’s Department. While in custody at the Denton County jail, Downey was ordered from her cell to repair a tear in the pants of a Denton County Sheriff’s Department employee, Adorphus Bell. Bell had asked that his pants be repaired by Ms. Downey. It was the policy of the Sheriff’s Department that repair of guard uniforms was done by trustees. The female officer on duty, Sadler, explained to Bell that Downey was not a trustee. Despite these circumstances, Sadler decided not to call her supervisor, and instead awoke Downey to repair Bell’s uniform. Downey told Sadler to ask one of the trustees, but Sadler responded that the trustees were asleep. Sadler then escorted Downey and Bell to a multipurpose room that contained sewing machines. *Id.*

The multipurpose room was a room with access controlled by a door that could be closed and locked.

The room contained a surveillance camera and was equipped with a voice activated security device. There was a blind spot in the room that could not be viewed from the observation window, but could be monitored only via the video camera at the matron’s station. Once the door to the multipurpose room was closed, the voice activated security device was the only means for someone outside the multipurpose room to listen to what was happening in the room. On the day of the rape, the voice activated security device had been disconnected and was not functioning. *Id.* at 384.

Initially, Sadler remained in the multipurpose room, but then left locking Bell and Downey alone in the room. Sadler checked on Downey and Bell approximately fifteen minutes later. Sadler did not check on Downey and Bell again for an hour and forty-five minutes. It was during this time that Bell sexually assaulted Downey. *Id.*

Denton County sought summary judgment under §101.057(2) alleging that Downey was complaining of an intentional tort committed by a governmental employee. After reviewing the Supreme Court’s opinion in Delaney and the Waco court decision in Hester, the Fifth Circuit rejected this argument. *Id.* at 388. The Fifth Circuit held that Downey’s claim was not barred by section 101.057(2) because her claim did not arise out of the assault, but instead out of Sadler’s negligence. The court specifically pointed out that Sadler violated the customary practice of having a trustee repair a guard’s pants, that Sadler acknowledged that it was unusual for a guard to request a specific inmate to do repairs, that Sadler left Bell and Downey alone in the multipurpose room for almost two hours without monitoring them in any fashion, and that this action was taken at the time when the voice activated security device for the room had been disconnected. *Id.* at 389. The supreme court found that as in the Hester case, Downey’s claim arose from the antecedent negligence of Sadler that was a proximate cause of Bell raping Downey. *Id.* The Fifth Circuit found Downey could pursue her claim regardless of whether the person who raped her was or was not a governmental employee.

At the same time, courts have found claims barred where the gravamen of the plaintiff’s suit is an intentional tort. See Gonzales v. City of El Paso, 978 S.W.2d 619, 622-23 (Tex.App.–El Paso 1998, no pet.); Holder, 954 S.W.2d at 806-08. Holder was raped by Potter, an on-duty City of Houston police officer. Potter had pulled Holder over in the early morning hours for a supposed traffic violation and ordered Holder to follow him. Holder followed Potter as he drove his patrol car to a downtown parking garage. Once there, Potter sexually assaulted Holder. *Id.* at 786.

Holder contended that she was not bringing suit based upon her having been sexually assaulted, but rather upon the City’s negligence in failing to properly supervise or monitor Potter’s use of his patrol car.

Holder contended that the car constituted tangible personal property, negligent use of which could subject the City to liability under the Act. *Id.* at 805. Specifically, Holder linked her injury to the car by alleging that the City was negligent in its supervision and monitoring of Potter and the use of his patrol car. Holder relied heavily on the fact that the patrol car was the instrument that Potter used to stop her and in which he later assaulted her. *Id.*

The Fourteenth Court of Appeals rejected Holder’s argument, finding that there was no nexus between the City’s actions with regard to the patrol car and the sexual assault. *Id.* at 807. “In this case, the use of the patrol car was not the ‘direct device’ causing Holder’s injury, and the ‘required causal nexus’ for liability [Act] is missing.” *Id.*; see also Henry, 52 S.W. 434, \*4-5 (condition or use of property did not proximately cause sexual assault on plaintiff); Ryan, 889 S.W.2d at 344-45.

Moreover, even where the plaintiff can allege some antecedent negligence that proximately caused the intentional tort, mere allegations alone will not be sufficient to avoid entry of a take nothing judgment. See Medrano, 989 S.W.2d at 144. The Medrano case arises from alleged assaults upon the plaintiffs by on duty police officers. *Id.* at 143. The plaintiffs asserted that they were bringing suit based not upon the intentional torts, but rather upon the City’s negligent hiring, negligent training, and negligent failure to train the officers who committed the assault. The City moved for and was granted summary judgment based upon sovereign immunity because the TCA did not waive immunity for suits based upon intentional torts. *Id.* The San Antonio Court of Appeals affirmed the summary judgment holding that the plaintiff’s global allegations without specific factual evidence to support negligent hiring, negligent training, and negligent failure to train was insufficient to defeat the City’s motion for summary judgment based upon sovereign immunity. *Id.* at 144-45. See Delaney, 835 S.W.2d at 60 (“although the [U.S. Supreme] Court added that the intentional tort exception could not be circumvented merely by alleging that the government was negligent in supervising the employee-tortfeasor, the claim in that case went beyond such allegations.”); see Harris County v. Cabazos, 177 S.W.3d 105 (Tex.App.–Houston [1st Dist.] 2005, no pet. h.) (plaintiff cannot circumvent intentional tort exception by couching claim in terms of negligence). Thus, a plaintiff must be able to **both plead and prove** acts of negligence that proximately caused their injury in order to avoid having their suits dismissed or a take nothing judgment entered based upon sovereign immunity as retained by §101.057(2) of the Act.

b. In Determining if the Intentional Tort Exception Applies, the Courts May Consider Whether the Active Tortfeasor Intended the Injury or Intended the Act or That Caused the Injury.

Courts of appeal have had to distinguish between intent to cause injury, as opposed to the cause of a particular event, in determining the scope of §101.057(2)’s exclusion from liability. Durbin v. City of Winnsboro, 135 S.W.3d 317, 321-25 (Tex.App–Texarkana 2004, pet filed); Pineda v. City of Houston, 175 S.W.3d 276 (Tex.App. –Houston [1st Dist.] 2004, no pet.). Durbin arose out of a high speed chase in which the plaintiffs’ son was killed after his motorcycle was intentionally bumped by a police car. Durbin, 135 S.W.3d at 321. The Durbins brought suit predicated liability upon the officer’s intentionally bumping the motorcycle. The city filed a plea to the jurisdiction on the grounds that the act of bumping the motorcycle was an intentional act. The city offered plaintiffs’ pleadings and deposition testimony to establish that having the police car hit the motorcycle was an intentional act. The plaintiffs opposed the plea to the jurisdiction on the grounds that the officer intended to end the chase by hitting the motorcycle with his car, his actions did not constitute an intentional tort. *Id.*

The Texarkana Court of Appeals explained that §101.057(2) excludes from liability under the TCA those actions by a governmental employee or officer that would constitute an intentional tort. *Id.* The court went on to note that intending to cause a particular action was not sufficient to be liable for an intentional tort. The Texarkana Court held that the difference between negligence and an intentional tort is not whether the defendant intended the act that caused the injury, but whether the defendant intended to injure the other person. *Id.* at 321. The court noted that, in some instances, such as rape or a physical beating, the intent to cause injury can be established by the defendant’s actions. Because the testimony before the court established that there was a dispute as to whether the officer intended to cause injury to the motorcycle rider or not, the court could not find, as a matter of law, that plaintiffs’ claims were barred by section 101.057(2) and it was error to grant the defendant’s plea to the jurisdiction. *Id.* at 325. But see Pineda, 175 S.W.3d 276, 283 (although the officers’ may not have intended their initial actions, they did intend the ultimate injury and because the focus of appellants’ claims is on the officers’ intentional tortious conduct, the city’s immunity is not waived).

However in Gordon, the Texas Supreme Court held that an excessive force claim based on an officer putting handcuffs on an arrestee were barred by the TCA’s intentional tort exclusion. City of Watauga v. Gordon, 434 S.W.3d 593-94. Gordon brought suit alleging that he was negligently injured when the arresting officer put handcuffs on too tight. *Id.* The City filed a plea to the jurisdiction asserting that the plaintiff’s claim was barred by the intentional tort exclusion in the TCA. *Id.* Gordon asserted that the officer did not commit the torts of assault or battery because the officer did not intend to injure him. *Id.* at 5. The Texas Supreme Court rejected this argument. The Court noted that, under the Texas Penal Code, an assault includes “intentionally or knowingly caus[ing] physical contact with another when he or she knows or should reasonably believe that the other will regard the contact as offensive.” *Id.* at 4 (quoting Tex. Pen. Code Section 22.01(a)). The Court then pointed out that the plaintiff complained the handcuffs were too tight and that any person would find the act of being handcuffed offensive. *Id.*

[T]he actions of a police officer in making an arrest necessarily involve a battery, although the conduct may not be actionable because of privilege. The officer is privileged to use reasonable force. But a police officer’s mistaken or accidental use of more force than reasonably necessary to make an arrest still “arises out of” the battery claim. “As the saying goes, there is no such thing as a negligent battery, since battery is defined to require an intentional touching without consent not a negligent one.”

*Id.* (citations omitted). Accordingly, the Court held that, “Although a specific intent to inflict injury is without question an intentional tort, and many batteries are of this type, a specific intent to injure is not an essential element of battery.” *Id.* at 5. Thus, all excessive force cases are barred because the officer’s conduct would constitute assault/battery, and the intentional tort exclusion bars such claims. *Id.* at 7.<sup>20</sup>

7. Section 101.060: Placement and Repair of Traffic Control Devices.

As discussed in section IVB8 above, the Act addresses liability based on the failure to erect road signs, the failure to replace road signs, and damages resulting from the absence, condition or malfunction of

<sup>20</sup> Gordon argued that no tort was committed because he consented to being handcuffed and consent negates the existence of a tort. City of Watauga v. Gordon, 434 S.W.3d 586, 591 (Tex. 2014). The Supreme Court also rejected Gordon’s argument holding that, “yielding to the assertion of legal authority ...must be treated as no consent at all....” *Id.* at

5 (quoting Prosser & Keeton on the Law of Torts, 121 (5th ed. 1984).

traffic or road signs and signal devices. The first provision of section 101.060, together with section 101.022(b), establish that a governmental entity can be held liable only for the failure to erect and place signs and signals required by law. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT §§ 101.060, 101.022(b); see State v. Rodriguez, 985 S.W.2d at 85; Villarreal, 810 S.W.2d at 421. Subsection (a)(1) of section 101.060 specifically states that liability cannot be based upon the failure to erect and use discretionary signs and signals.<sup>21</sup>

The supreme court has determined that all signs, signals, and warning devices provided for in the Manual are discretionary and cannot form the basis of liability. The Manual was adopted by the highway department under Transportation Code section 544.001. The Manual purports to obligate all governmental units in the state to act in compliance with its terms. The Manual identifies certain signs and signals as discretionary, while appearing to mandate the use of other signs. King, 808 S.W.2d at 466. The supreme court held that other provisions of the Manual establish that its terms are not mandatory, in a legal sense. *Id.* at 466; Villarreal, 810 S.W.2d at 420-21. Therefore, while the Manual may appear to require the use or erection of certain signs, it does not establish a legal standard under which a governmental entity can be held liable. King, 808 S.W.2d at 466; Villarreal, 810 S.W.2d at 421 (holding that the Manual merely establishes construction standards for signs which an entity chooses to erect, but does not require the erection of any signs, signals or warning devices).

Once a governmental entity chooses to erect signs or warning devices, it can be held liable for the malfunction, removal, or destruction of those items. The erection of signs, signals, or warning devices, whether required by law or out of the exercise of discretion, creates an obligation to maintain them and insure they are working properly. Sullivan, 33 S.W.3d at 13-14; Reyes v. City of Houston, 4 S.W.3d 459, 462 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1999, pet. denied); Norris, 550 S.W.2d at 386; Lawson, 524 S.W.2d at 351. See Donovan, 768 S.W.2d at 908-909. Thus, the placement of a traffic control device creates a duty to replace or repair that device within a reasonable time of learning that it is absent or malfunctioning. See Sullivan, 33 S.W.3d 13-14; Sparkman, 519 S.W.2d at 852; Donovan, 768 S.W.2d at 908-909; TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.060.

The issue of whether or not a governmental entity failed to repair or replace absent or malfunctioning signs/signals in a reasonable time, typically comes down to a question of whether the governmental body had notice of the problem. McKnight v. Calvert, 539 S.W.3d 447, 455–56 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2017, pet.

filed) (fact issue existed regarding whether officer patrolling area should have noticed vegetation obscuring stop sign, and would thereby support constructive notice); Miller, 893 S.W.2d at 27, 33. See, e.g., Garza, 878 S.W.2d at 675; Zambory, 838 S.W.2d at 582.

The Donovan case has some significant consequences regarding how a plaintiff can establish liability for a downed sign or malfunctioning traffic signal. The Donovans presented testimony of an “excited utterance” made by a passerby after the accident. *Id.* at 906-08. This person, who was never identified, volunteered that days prior to the accident she had reported to the City that the stop sign was down. *Id.* at 906. The Donovans also presented testimony of four other witnesses who estimated the stop sign was down for a period of time ranging from several days to two or three weeks. *Id.* at 909. To refute this testimony, the City called police officers, sanitation workers and an engineer to testify regarding: (1) how often the City employees would be in or through the intersection; and (2) city employees’ training to report any problem with traffic control devices.

The engineer also testified that the City keeps a log of telephone calls regarding missing traffic signs and that the log contained no calls concerning the downed stop sign for the six weeks prior to the accident. *Id.* The City apparently argued at trial that if the stop sign was down, the City would have received immediate notice of that fact, and that the absence of any notation to that effect established the City’s lack of notice. See *id.*

The Dallas Court of Appeals, however, concluded that the City’s employee proved that it had notice. The court found that the plaintiff’s witnesses established the absence of the sign for at least several days. The City meanwhile established that its employees, who have an obligation to check on and report missing signs, would have gone through the intersection within the days preceding the accident. *Id.* Consequently, the court of appeals found the City’s attempts to defend suits by establishing procedures for checking on and reporting down stop signs, helped establish notice once the plaintiff puts on proof of the absence, destruction, or malfunction of traffic control devices. *Id.* The Austin Court of Appeals has held that §101.060(a)(2) does not require actual notice. City of Austin v. Lamas, 160 S.W.3d 97 (Tex.App.—Austin 2004, no pet.). In Lamas, a passenger on a city bus was injured after the bus failed to observe a stop sign and ran over a dip in the road. There was evidence that the City had actual notice that the sign was obscured by foliage. Distinguishing the language in §101.060(a)(2) from §101.060(a)(3), the court held that actual notice was not required.

special defects. TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 101.060(c); Adams, 888 S.W.2d at 612.

<sup>21</sup> The provisions of this chapter do not apply, however, to

A governmental unit is given a reasonable time to replace a missing sign or to repair a malfunctioning signal only if the malfunction or absence was the result of component failure, act of God, or act of a third-party. Ramming, 861 S.W.2d at 465. A governmental entity may be held strictly liable for injuries and deaths if the absence or malfunction of a traffic control device was caused by its employee. *Id.*

A governmental entity cannot defeat a suit based on the failure to maintain traffic control devices based on the discretionary act defense. As noted above, section 101.056 of the Act precludes a governmental entity from being held liable for discretionary acts. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.056. The discretionary act exclusion to liability is carried over to subsection (a)(1) of section 101.060 of the TCA. Sullivan, 33 S.W.3d at 14-15. In fact, section 101.060(a)(1) expressly provides that liability for traffic control devices cannot be predicated upon the initial placement of signs, signals and warning devices if the failure to have that device in place was the result of a discretionary decision of the governmental entity. *Id.* (however a governmental entity can be liable for failure to have control devices in place that are consistent with municipal ordinance). The discretionary exclusion to liability is not included in subsections (a)(2) and (a)(3) of section 101.060 that provide a governmental entity can be held liable for the absence, condition, malfunction, or removal of traffic control devices if it fails to fix the problem within a reasonable time after having notice of the problem. *Id.* at 14; TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.060(a). Thus, a governmental entity cannot defend its failure to maintain a traffic control device based upon the discretionary act defense set forth in section 101.056 of the TCA. *Id.* at 14-15 (“[the plaintiffs] are permitted to maintain their allegation that the city negligently installed and maintained [the school] crosswalk”); Reyes, 4 S.W.3d at 462. Moreover, there is no immunity when the entity exercises its discretion in making the decision to install safety devices, but does not actually install the device within a reasonable time. Sipes, 146 S.W.3d at 280; City of Fort Worth v. Robles, 51 S.W.3d 436, 442 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 2001, pet. denied). Reasonableness is a question of fact precluding summary judgment. Sipes, 146 S.W.3d at 280.

8. Section 101.101: Exclusion From Liability Unless the Governmental Entity Has Notice Within Six Months After the Incident Occurred.

Subchapter D of the TCA provides the procedures for bringing suit. Under the Code Construction Act, compliance with the statutory prerequisites to any statutory cause of action is a jurisdictional prerequisite to suit, at least against the State. TEX. GOV’T CODE § 311.034. The most important of these procedures is the requirement that a governmental entity receive prompt notice of the plaintiff’s claim. In the absence of notice,

the governmental entity maintains all of its common law immunities. Putthoff, 934 S.W.2d at 173.

In 2004, the Texas Supreme Court held that the notice of claim was not a jurisdictional pre-requisite for bringing suit under the TCA. Univ. of Tex. Sw. Med. Ctr. v. Loutzenhiser, 140 S.W.3d 351, 365-66 (Tex. 2004). In 2005, the Legislature amended section 101.101 of the TCA making the giving of notice a requirement to establishing the court’s jurisdiction to hear the case. Univ. of Tex. Sw. Med Ctr., v. Arancibia, 324 S.W.3d 544, 546 (Tex. 2010). While the amended version of section 101.101 does not state that it is retroactive, the Supreme Court has held that the requirement to give notice in order to establish jurisdiction is retroactive to suits filed before the amendments came into effect. *Id.* at 548.

A governmental unit must have actual or formal notice of the accident giving rise to the suit within six months of its occurrence. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.101. Notice is a jurisdictional prerequisite to the bringing of suit under the TCA. Arancibia, 324 S.W.3d at 46. However, suit can be filed within six months of the incident without the plaintiff having given notice. Colquitt v. Brazoria County, 324 S.W.3d 539, 544, (Tex. 2010). If suit is filed within six months of the incident without having given formal notice, then the pleading must give the entity all of the information it would have received had it been given formal notice. *Id.*; see also Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Padron, 591 S.W.3d 684, 695 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 2019, pet. denied) (petition filed within six months fulfilled all requirements and provided sufficient notice).

The purpose of the TCA’s notice provision is to enable the governmental unit to investigate while the facts are fresh and the conditions are substantially similar in order to guard against unfounded claims, settle claims, and prepare for trial. Cathey v. Booth, 900 S.W.2d 339, 341 (Tex. 1995) (per curiam); Colquitt v. Brazoria County, 324 S.W.3d at 544; City of Houston v. Torres, 621 S.W.2d 588, 591 (Tex. 1981); Garcia v. Tex. Dep’t of Criminal Justice, 902 S.W.2d 728, 731 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1995, no writ); McDonald v. State, 936 S.W.2d 734, 738 (Tex.App.—Waco 1997, no pet.); Putthoff, 934 S.W.2d at 163; Bell v. Dallas-Fort Worth Reg’l Airport Bd., 427 F. Supp. 927, 929 (N.D. Tex. 1977). Notice also aids governmental entities in managing and controlling their finances. Colquitt, 324 S.W.3d at 543.

Accordingly, formal notice must apprise the defendant of the injury, and the time, manner, and place of the incident. *Id.* A letter from a lawyer that enclosed a copy of a police report that provided all the information required by the statute as well as the notation that plaintiff broke her arm when she slipped on water in a school bus was sufficient formal notice. Tejano Ctr. for Cmyt. Concerns, Inc. v. Olvera, 2014 WL 4402210, \*4-5. See also San Antonio Water Sys. v.

Smith, 451 S.W.3d 442, 451-52 (letter from lawyer stating his client was hurt when she fell into hole with exposed pipes and stating a demand would be sent when details of her injuries were known was sufficient to give rise to need to investigate). In the absence of notice within six months, plaintiff is precluded from bringing suit. State v. McAllister, 2004 WL 2434347 (Tex.App.—Amarillo 2004, pet. denied); Rath v. State, 788 S.W.2d 48 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1990, writ denied).

While actual notice will substitute for formal notice, actual notice is effective only if the governmental entity has knowledge of its probable fault in causing the accident. Arancibia, 324 S.W.3d at 548-49; Cathey v. Booth, 900 S.W.2d 339, 341, 347-48 (Tex. 1995); see Bourne v. Nueces Cnty. Hosp. Dist., 749 S.W.2d 630, 632 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1988, writ denied) (“‘[a]ctual notice’ under [Section 101.101 of the TCA] . . . mean[s] that knowledge which the governmental unit would have had if the claimant had complied with the formal notice requirement”). Section 101.101 provides that formal notice is not required if the governmental unit has actual knowledge of the incident giving rise to the suit. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.010(c). Actual notice must provide information comparable to what the governmental entity would have if it received formal notice. City of San Antonio v. Tenorio, 543 S.W.3d 772, 776 (Tex. 2018) (“If a governmental unit investigates an accident, whether the information acquired through its investigation meets the actual notice requirements of the TTCA depends upon the particular facts of the case.”); Bell, 427 F. Supp. at 927. Actual notice must also apprise the defendant of the need to investigate the claim. See Rosales v. Brazoria County, 764 S.W.2d 342, 344 (Tex.App.—Texarkana 1989, no writ); Bourne, 749 S.W.2d at 632; Ray, 712 S.W.2d at 274.

A governmental entity is held to have actual notice only when it has knowledge of the name and address of those injured, the damage or injuries sustained, the time and place of the incident, and its probable fault in causing the accident or injuries. Cathey, 900 S.W.2d at 341 (Tex. 1995); Rosales, 764 S.W.2d at 344; Bourne, 749 S.W.2d at 633; Ray, 712 S.W.2d at 274. If a governmental unit has this subjective awareness of fault, then requiring formal, written notice would do nothing to further the statutory purposes of information gathering, settling claims, and preparing for trial. Arancibia, 324 S.W.3d at 549 (“Fault, as it pertains to actual notice, is not synonymous with liability; rather it implies responsibility for the injury claimed. Subjective.”) “[S]ubjective awareness often will be proved ‘if at all, by circumstantial evidence.’” *Id.* (quoting Tex. Dept. of Criminal Justice v. Simons, 140

S.W.3d 338 (Tex. 2004)). If the governmental unit does not have knowledge of all of this information, the plaintiff’s failure to provide formal notice will preclude suit. Huffine v. Tomball Hosp. Auth., 979 S.W.2d 795, 800 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1998, no pet.); Gonzalez, 940 S.W.2d at 795; Ray, 712 S.W.2d at 274; Vela, 703 S.W.2d at 725-26.

Consequently, a governmental entity is held to have actual notice only when it has “knowledge of the information [the entity] is entitled to be given under section 101.101(a) and a subjective awareness that its fault produced or contributed to the claimed injury.” City of San Antonio v. Johnson, 140 S.W.3d 350, 351 (Tex. 2004); Tex. Dep’t of Criminal Justice v. Simons, 140 S.W.3d 338 (Tex. 2004); see Tenorio, 543 S.W.3d at 778 (holding that “[e]vidence that a vehicle being pursued by the police is involved in a collision is not, by itself, sufficient to raise a fact question about whether the [defendant], for purposes of the TTCA, had subjective awareness that it was in some manner at fault in connection with the collision”); Blevins v. Tex. Dep’t of Transp., 140 S.W.3d 337 (Tex. 2004). Thus, actual notice MUST put the entity on notice of the need to investigate the incident, including the entity’s subjective awareness of its fault in the matter. City of Dallas v. Carbajal, 324 S.W.3d 537 (Tex. 2010). See also Rivera, 985 S.W.2d at 206 (actual notice requires knowledge of probable fault in causing the accident or injuries; Rosales, 764 S.W.2d at 344; Bourne, 749 S.W.2d at 633; Ray, 712 S.W.2d at 274.<sup>22</sup>

A governmental entity can be charged with actual notice based upon the knowledge of their agents and employees. City of Texarkana v. Nard, 575 S.W.2d 648, 651-52 (Tex. Civ. App.—Tyler 1978, writ ref’d n.r.e.); Ray, 712 S.W.2d at 274. Actual notice is imputed to the entity when an official, or employee charged with a duty to investigate or report the incident has knowledge of all three elements of actual/forward notice. Gonzalez, 940 S.W.2d at 795-96; McDonald, 936 S.W.2d at 738. See Univ. of Tex. Health Sci. Ctr. at San Antonio v. Stevens, 330 S.W.3d 335, 339-40 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 2010, no pet.) (actual notice imputed where pediatrics residency program director conducted faculty review of chemical burn incident involving mistaken injection of topical anesthetic into woundwound by resident and, according to operating agreement between residency program and hospital, had agreed to conduct investigations into problems involving residents); Dinh v. Harris Cnty. Hosp. Dist., 896 S.W.2d 248, 253 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1995, writ dismissed w.o.j.). Actual notice thus is not limited to only a particular government official or employee, such as a director of risk management or hospital administrator.

<sup>22</sup> The Rivera decision suggests that an answer denying a

governmental defendant had actual or constructive notice must be verified. Rivera, 2001 WL 35962, 44 Tex. Sup. Ct. J. 597.

See Stevens, 330 S.W.3d at 339; Dinh, 896 S.W.2d at 253.

“[A] governmental entity cannot put on metaphorical blinders and designate only one person in its entire organization through whom actual notice may be imputed when the facts support that there are other representatives who have a duty to gather facts and investigate on behalf of the governmental entity.”

*Id.* Accordingly the San Antonio Court of Appeals held that a governmental entity cannot avoid receiving notice by “self-imposed compartmentalization of claims processing and the lack of communication among City agencies and departments.” San Antonio Water Sys., 451 S.W.3d at 452 (“The purpose of the notice requirement is to ensure prompt reporting of claims to enable governmental units to gather the information necessary to guard against unfounded claims, facilitate settlement, and prepare for trial. .... In this case, that purpose was served” even if the water department was not the entity that received actual notice).

In Nard, the City was held to have actual notice as a consequence of an investigation of the traffic accident by its police department. Nard, 575 S.W.2d at 651-52. The court held that the City had actual notice not only because it had the names and addresses of the plaintiffs, but also because its employees investigated the accident, made a report reflecting plaintiff’s injuries and noted the malfunctioning traffic light that caused the accident. *Id.*

In Worsdale v. City of Killeen, 578 S.W.3d 57 (Tex. 2019), the City conducted a “wide-ranging post-accident investigation” that determined the City had responsibility for a road’s condition and had failed to remediate a hazard in the roadway. *Id.* at 67. The City had been “aware that the road had been blocked for at least two years, but had refused to remove” the obstruction because “city officials believed the road was ‘not owned or maintained by the city.’” *Id.* When the City realized it did have a duty to maintain the road, it gained subjective awareness of fault and thus had actual notice. *See id.* at 67–68.

In La Joya Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Gonzalez, 532 S.W.3d 892 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi 2017, pet. filed), the court found a fact issue on whether the District had notice that a bus driver was at fault for a wrongful death. *Id.* at 895–96. The plaintiff argued that the involvement of the local police department, as well as the suspension, drug-testing, and eventual resignation of the bus driver, were signs that the District was aware of its potential fault in the incident. *Id.* at 899. The court also considered the transcript of audio from the incident, and concluded that the driver had notice of potential fault, which could possibly be imputed to the District

from his recorded statements where he reported the incident to an unknown individual. *Id.* at 901–02.

Ray involved injuries to a child while in the defendant hospital. The Fort Worth Court of Appeals held that because the plaintiff was in the hospital at the time of her injuries, the county had knowledge through its agents and employees of both the incident and its probable fault. Ray, 712 S.W.2d at 274; *see also* Tex. Tech Univ. Health Scis. Ctr. v. Bonewit, No. 07-16-00211-CV, 2017 Tex. App. LEXIS 10775 (Tex. App.—Amarillo Nov. 15, 2017, pet. filed) (negative outcome of surgery with surgeons present was sufficient to impute actual awareness). Compare Arancibia, 324 S.W.3d at 549-50 (patient died three days after two resident physicians performed laparoscopic hernia surgery, emergency surgery showed that during the hernia operation, her bowel was perforated, leading to acute peritonitis, acute peritonitis, there was only one possible instrumentality of the harm—the governmental actor, an attending physician, was present while the two resident physicians performed the hernia repair and the day after hernia repair and the day after patient’s death, the attending physician emailed his immediate supervisor, who was the chief of the gastrointestinal/endocrine division to give his supervisor a “heads up on a terrible outcome with” a patient) *with* Univ. of Tex. Health Sci. Ctr. v. McQueen, 431 S.W.3d 750, 758 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist] 2014, no pet.) (while there was a note of bowel injury during surgery, patient returned to the hospital twice after surgery, but no physical physician here spoke with or notified risk management or any supervisor—such as the head of the department—and no investigation was conducted).

However, the mere fact that an employee of an entity or agency conducted an investigation or prepared a report related to the event will not constitute actual notice for purposes of the TCA. Carbajal, 324 S.W.3d at 538. As the Supreme Court explained:

It is not enough that a governmental unit should have investigated an incident ..., or that it did investigate, perhaps as part of routine safety procedures, or that it should have known from the investigation it conducted that it might have been at fault. If a governmental unit is not subjectively aware of its fault, it does not have the same incentive to gather information that the statute is designed to provide, even when it would not be unreasonable to believe that the governmental unit was at fault.

[M]erely investigating an accident is insufficient to provide actual notice. *See, e.g., id.* at 347 (“Cathey cannot fairly be read to suggest that a governmental unit has actual



notice of a claim if it could or even should have learned of its possible fault by investigating the incident.”); *Id.* at 347 (“[A] governmental unit cannot acquire actual notice merely by conducting an investigation, or even by obtaining information that would reasonably suggest its culpability. The governmental unit must have actual, subjective awareness of its fault in the matter.”).

Although both parties agree that the road was not properly blocked, the report here did not provide the City with subjective awareness of fault because it did not even imply, let alone expressly state, that the City was at fault. The report only describes what apparently caused the accident (missing barricades). It does not say who failed to erect or maintain the barricades. [Plaintiff] ignores the possibility that a private contractor or another governmental entity (such as the county or state) could have been responsible for the road’s condition. Indeed, after investigating the accident, the City determined that the Texas Department of Transportation was at fault. Simply put, the police report here is no more than a routine safety investigation, which is insufficient to provide actual notice.

By holding that the officer’s “perception of the cause of the accident” sufficed to provide actual notice, the court of appeals overlooked the policy underlying actual notice: “ ‘to enable governmental units to gather information necessary to guard against unfounded claims, settle claims, and prepare for trial,’ “ Simons, 140 S.W.3d at 347 (quoting Cathey, 900 S.W.2d at 341). When a police report does not indicate that the governmental unit was at fault, the governmental unit has little, if any, incentive to investigate its potential liability because it is unaware that liability is even at issue. See Id. But one must note that, in reaching this holding, the Supreme Court expressly stated that it was not deciding whether the City would have had actual notice if the report had expressly stated that the City was at fault.

*Id.* at fn 1 See;see Tex. Dep’t Dep’t of State Health Serv. v. Gonzalez, No. 13–14–00259–CV, 2014 WL 7205332 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi) (Dec. 18, 2014, no pet.) (employee taking photos of accident and sending them to his supervisor is not sufficient to give agency actual notice).

At the same time, the knowledge of or notice given to one agency or unit of state government is not sufficient to satisfy section 101.101 if suit is to be brought against another agency or unit of state

government. Reese v. Tex. State Dep’t of Highways and Pub. Transp., 831 S.W.2d 529, 530 (Tex.App.—Tyler 1992, writ denied). But see Stevens, 330 S.W.3d at 339–40 (“[A] governmental entity cannot put on metaphorical blinders and designate only one person in its entire organization through whom actual notice may be imputed when the facts support that there are other representatives who have a duty to gather facts and investigate on behalf of the governmental entity”); San Antonio Water Sys., 451 S.W.3d at 452 (a local governmental entity cannot avoid receiving notice by “self-imposed compartmentalization of claims processing and the lack of communication among City agencies and departments”)). The time for giving notice runs from the date of the incident and not the plaintiff’s discovery of injury. Putthoff, 934 S.W.2d at 174; Sanford v. Tex. A&M Univ., 680 S.W.2d 650 (Tex.App.—Beaumont 1984, writ ref’d n.r.e.). Sanford was a telephone repair man working at Texas A&M University’s agricultural research and extension center in 1975. *Id.* at 651. While working at the research and extension center, Sanford was exposed to strong pesticides. Over the next five years, Sanford suffered fainting spells, dizziness, and kidney problems. It was not until 1980 that a doctor told Sanford that his symptoms were consistent with exposure to pesticides. Sanford claimed that he did not and could not have discovered the defendant’s wrongful conduct prior to 1980. He argued that the discovery rule excused him from failing to file suit within the statute of limitations and giving notice within six months of the incident. The Beaumont Court of Appeals rejected this argument and held that while the discovery rule extends the statute of limitations, it does not affect the time period for giving notice. *Id.* at 651–652. The Beaumont court, therefore, affirmed the entry of summary judgment in favor of the defendant because Sanford failed to provide notice in a timely manner. *Id.* See Univ. of Tex. Med. Branch v. Greenhouse, 889 S.W.2d 427, 432 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1994, writ denied) (medical malpractice plaintiff’s time for giving notice under the TCA ran from event giving rise to suit even if she did not discover injury until years later). In Greenhouse, the First Court of Appeals reasoned:

The Texas Supreme Court has said of the Act, “Once a plaintiff invokes the procedural devices of the Texas Tort Claims Act, to bring a cause of action against the State, then he is also bound by the limitations and remedies provided in the statute”...

While we believe it is remarkably unfair to deprive Greenhouse of her right of recourse against UTMB because she was unable, through no fault of her own, to comply with the notice requirements, we must agree with

UTMB that the trial court erred in applying the discovery rule.

Greenhouse, 889 S.W.2d at 431-32 (citation omitted).

However, Houston’s First Court of Appeals has held that, where each exposure to a substance can cause injury, then notice need only come within six (6) months of the last exposure. Jefferson Cty. v. Farris, 569 S.W.3d 814 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2018)(pet. filed). The court of appeals held that, because with asbestos injuries “there can be more than one incident giving rise to the claim,” each exposure to asbestos creates a new cause of action. *Id.* Accordingly, the plaintiff’s notice was timely if it came within six months of an asbestos exposure. *Id.*

A year later, the same Houston court found that the notice requirement is not tolled by the mental incapacity of a claimant. Dinh v. Harris County Hosp. Dist., 896 S.W.2d 248 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1995, writ dismissed w.o.j.). In 1997, the San Antonio court adopted the Greenhouse reasoning and found that the discovery rule did not apply when two years had passed since an alleged misdiagnosis of cancer. Streetman v. Univ. of Tex. Health Science Ctr. at San Antonio, 952 S.W.2d 53 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 1997, no writ).

Assuming that the majority rule is that an incapacity tolls the notice requirement, a plaintiff is no longer excused from giving notice, once that incapacity has been removed. *Id.*; see McCrary, 642 S.W.2d at 154. However, in 2004, the supreme court held that the six month notice period is not tolled by the claimant’s minority. Martinez v. Val Verde County Hosp. Dist., 140 S.W.3d 370, 372 (Tex. 2004). The Court reasoned that the Act does not toll the period by its express terms. *Id.*; see TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE ANN. § 16.001 (tolling period limited to chapter 16).

Prior to the Dinh and Streetman decisions, it was generally accepted that minors and incompetents were excused from giving notice under section 101.101 until such time as their incapacity was removed. Torres, 621 S.W.2d at 591; McCrary v. Odessa, 482 S.W.2d 151, 154-55 (Tex. 1972); Rath, 788 S.W.2d at 48. The Corpus Christi court has held that, “[o]nce a guardian is appointed, the disability is removed; a guardian of the estate is empowered to initiate a lawsuit.” Rath, 788 S.W.2d at 51. The guardian’s failure to give notice within six months of his appointment barred Rath’s suit. *Id.* It could be argued that a parent’s hiring of an attorney to represent a minor also removes any disability, obligating someone acting on the minor’s behalf to give notice within six months. See *id.*

The Supreme Court has also held that the time for giving notice for an injury to a fetus runs from birth. Univ. of Tex. v. Loutzenhiser, 140 S.W.3d 351 (Tex. 2004). Thus, while actual or formal notice was not received within six months after the procedure alleged to have caused the injury, suit under TCA was not barred

as notice was received within six months of injured child’s birth. See *id.*

While a city’s charter can shorten the period of time required for giving notice, the restrictions must be reasonable. The Act ratified and approved city charters and ordinance provisions requiring notice in less than six months of the date of the accident. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.101(b). Claims against cities, therefore, must be supported by evidence of actual or formal notice within the time period provided in the charter. Torres, 621 S.W.2d at 590-91. Texas courts will enforce and uphold charter provisions establishing shorter time periods for providing notice, as long as they are reasonable. *Id.* at 591. Consequently, a claimant may have less than six months in which to give notice of his claim if a city charter so provides. *Id.*

#### 9. Other Statutes May Lead to Immunity.

Other statutes granting immunity from liability may interact with the TCA and preclude liability. In Tarrant Cty. v. Bonner, 574 S.W.3d 893 (Tex. 2019), the plaintiff alleged that a chair collapsed and injured him due to negligent use of personal property while he was being treated for diabetes. *Id.* at 895. The County asserted immunity from liability for negligent acts and omissions related to inmate activities, basing its claim on Texas Code of Criminal Procedure art. 42.40 and Texas Gov’t Code § 497.096. *Id.* at 896. These statutes provide immunity from liability for negligent actions or failures to act in connection with community service or work programs performed by inmates, instead imposing a conscious indifference or reckless disregard standard. See TEXAS CODE CRIM. PROC. art. 42.40; TEX. GOV’T CODE § 497.096. The Texas Supreme Court agreed that the County was immune from liability to the extent its corporate actions or omissions were not performed with conscious indifference or reckless disregard for the safety of others. Bonner, 574 S.W.3d at 900. In other words, while the TCA created a waiver of sovereign immunity, the County was nonetheless immunized from liability to the extent its acts were merely negligent and conneted with an inmate activity or program. See *id.* at 902–03.

### VII. ASSERTING SOVEREIGN IMMUNITY AND SUBMISSION OF A GOVERNMENTAL PREMISES LIABILITY CASE TO THE JURY

Both the assertion of sovereign immunity and the submission to jury in cases where sovereign immunity is at issue raises particular issues the practitioner must consider.

### A. Asserting Immunity from Suit in a Plea to the Jurisdiction.

Because immunity from suit deprives a trial court of jurisdiction, it can properly be raised through a plea to the jurisdiction. Jones, 8 S.W.3d 637. By contrast, immunity from liability does not affect a trial court’s jurisdiction and, thus, cannot be asserted through a plea to the jurisdiction. *Id.* at 638-39; Lueck, 290 S.W.3d at 882. A plea to the jurisdiction contests the trial court’s authority to determine the subject matter of a pending suit or cause of action. Bland Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Blue, 34 S.W.3d 547, 554 (Tex. 2000).

Plaintiffs must be very careful to ensure that the facts alleged in their pleadings and any evidence they offer at a hearing on a plea to the jurisdiction are sufficient to establish a waiver of immunity from suit. An order granting a plea to the jurisdiction constitutes a final judgment. Harris County v. Sykes, 136 S.W.3d 635 (Tex. 2004). That final judgment will not only conclude that litigation, but will likely bar claims against any other defendants (the governmental entity or other governmental employees). *Id.*; TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 101.106. Therefore, a plaintiff must make certain that the pleadings on file at the time of the hearing and the evidence offered at the hearing establish that their claims and causes of action fall within a waiver of immunity. Tex. Dep’t of Criminal Justice v. Miller, 51 S.W.3d 583, 587 (Tex. 2001).

In a suit against a governmental defendant, the plaintiff has the burden of affirmatively pleading a valid waiver of immunity from suit that vests the trial court with jurisdiction. Dallas Area Rapid Transit v. Whitley, 104 S.W.3d 540 (Tex. 2003). See Rhule, 417 S.W.3d at 442 (every court has an obligation to determine if it has subject matter jurisdiction, a judgment entered when the court lacks jurisdiction is fundamental error and such a judgment is not final). While plaintiff’s allegations are liberally construed, plaintiff’s live pleading must demonstrate, by the facts alleged and reference to statute or other provision of law, that immunity from suit had been waived. Leatherwood v. Prairie View A&M Univ., 2004 WL 253275 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.], 2004, no pet. h.); City of Weslaco v. Cantu, 2004 WL 210790 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi, 2004, no pet.); City of Canyon v. McBroom, 121 S.W.3d 410 (Tex.App.—Amarillo 2003, no pet. h.); Hardin Cty. Community Supervision and Corrections Dep’t v. Sullivan, 106 S.W.3d 186, 189 (Tex.App.—Austin 2003, pet. denied). Conclusory allegations, such as statements that a plaintiff’s constitutional rights have been violated or that a person or agency exceeded its authority, are insufficient to establish a waiver of immunity from suit. Creedmoor-Maha Water Supply Corp., 307 S.W.3d at 516. Thus, a plaintiff must plead specific facts, not just conclusory allegations or legal conclusions. See Texans Uniting for Reform and Freedom v. Saenz, 319 S.W.3d 914, 920 (Tex.App.—Austin 2010); Creedmoor, 307

S.W.3d at 516; Good Shepard Med. Ctr., Inc. v. State, 306 S.W.3d 825, 836 (Tex.App.—Austin 2010). Furthermore, the court does not have to accept a plaintiff’s allegations if its pleadings relate to issues of law rather than issues of fact. Hearts Bluff Game Ranch, Inc., 381 S.W.3d at 487 (plaintiff’s pleading must not negate the cause of action by asserting a taking claim against the state when the actions in question were taken by the federal government). In Hearts Bluff the plaintiff alleged a taking claim but the court found that alleged action of the governmental entity could not as a matter of law constitute a taking.

#### 1. The Basis of the Plea to the Jurisdiction—the Plaintiff’s Pleadings or the Factual Basis of the Plaintiff’s Claims

If the plea to the jurisdiction challenges the facts alleged in plaintiff’s live pleading, then the court must consider the evidence offered by both sides as necessary to resolve the question of jurisdiction. Lueck, 290 S.W.3d at 884 (to allow the plaintiff to stand on allegations alone, would eliminate the use of pleas to challenge a court’s jurisdiction); Tex. Dep’t of Parks & Wildlife v. Miranda, 133 S.W.3d 217 (Tex. 2004).

At the same time, “to determine if the plaintiff has met [the burden of pleading immunity from suit], ‘we consider the facts alleged by the plaintiff and, to the extent it is relevant to the jurisdictional issue, the evidence submitted by the parties.’” Dallas Area Rapid Transit, 104 S.W.3d at 542. In some instances, establishing a waiver of immunity requires establishing liability. Lueck, 290 S.W.3d at 883; Creedmoor, 307 S.W.3d at 516, fn.8; Combs v. City of Webster, 311 S.W.3d at 94-95 (in some instances, courts must construe statutes in connection with a plea to the jurisdiction in order to determine whether a defendant acted within her statutory authority). See also Leach, 335 S.W.3d at 396-97. See Tex. Dep’t. of Transp. v. Perches, 388 S.W.3d 652, 656 (Tex. 2012)(plaintiff’s pleading was insufficient as a matter of law to assert an ordinary defect claim); Hearts Bluff Game Ranch, Inc., 381 S.W.3d at 487 (plaintiff’s pleading must not negate the cause of action by asserting a taking claim against the state when the actions in question were taken by the federal government). When determining if the court has jurisdiction that implicates the merits of the plaintiff’s claims, the relevant evidence must be reviewed to determine if there are fact questions as to the elements of plaintiff’s claims. Leach, 335 S.W.3d at 396-97.; Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 217. However, when the waiver of immunity from suit and waiver of immunity from liability are not co-extensive, then the court must only consider pleadings and evidence related to whether there is a waiver of immunity from suit. See Lueck, 290 S.W.3d at 883.

In deciding a plea to the jurisdiction, the court cannot weigh the merits of the plaintiff’s claims, but

must consider only the pleadings and evidence pertinent to the jurisdictional inquiry. Lueck, 290 S.W.3d at 884; Miranda, 133 S.W.3d 217 (Tex. 2004). While the court cannot rule based upon its opinion of the merits of plaintiff’s claim when immunity from liability and damages are “co-extensive” under a statute, the court must determine whether the plaintiff has plead and all of the offered evidence raise a fact question as to the elements of liability that are necessary to establish jurisdiction. Lueck, 290 S.W.3d at 880-81. “[W]hen the facts underlying the merits and subject-matter jurisdiction are intertwined, the State may assert sovereign immunity from suit by a plea to the jurisdiction, even when the trial court must consider evidence ‘necessary to resolve the jurisdictional issues raised’.” *Id.* at 880. Thus, in order to defeat a plea to the jurisdiction a plaintiff must plead all of the elements of the cause of action they are bringing. See Tex. Dep’t. of Transp. v. Perches, 388 S.W.3d 652, 656 (Tex. 2012)(plaintiff’s pleading was insufficient as a matter of law to assert an ordinary defect claim). Similarly, the plaintiff must allege facts that will support the elements of the plaintiff’s claims. Hearts Bluff Game Ranch, Inc., 381 S.W.3d at 482-84. Hearts Bluff brought a takings claims against the state based on the designating their property as a potential location for a reservoir and responding to request for comment from a federal agency and stated the state opposed designation of plaintiff’s property as federal mitigation bank. *Id.* The Texas Supreme Court held that, as a matter of law, the actions upon which plaintiff predicated the taking claim could not constitute the proximate cause of the taking of the property at issue and, therefore, held there was no waiver of immunity for plaintiff’s taking claim. *Id.*

The Texas Supreme Court has further explicitly approved the use of the no-evidence standard in a motion for summary judgment where the jurisdictional facts implicate the merits. Town of Shady Shores v. Swanson, 590 S.W.3d 544, 552 (Tex. 2019). In Swanson, a town voted to terminate its town secretary’s employment, leading to claims under both the Whistleblower Act and Open Meetings/Public Information Acts. *Id.* at 547. The town filed both a plea to the jurisdiction and traditional/no-evidence motions for summary judgment on all claims, which the trial court denied. *Id.* The court of appeals rejected the no-evidence summary judgment on purely procedural grounds and only addressed the traditional summary judgment. Reversing the court of appeals’ refusal to address the no-evidence motion for summary judgment, the Supreme Court held that Rule 166a(i) safeguards are sufficient protection and no-evidence motion for summary judgment could require plaintiff to present sufficient evidence to establish a waiver of immunity from suit and establish the trial court’s jurisdiction. *Id.* at 552. This is consistent with prior holdings that a plea to the jurisdiction can be based on the failure to

sufficiently plead jurisdictional facts, as seen in cases like Lueck and Hearts Bluff. Thus, the plaintiff needs to:

1. plead the elements of the claim, and make sure that its pleadings don’t negate the elements of a claim; and
2. offer evidence regarding liability that is relevant to establishing the court’s jurisdiction. *Id.*; Lueck, 290 S.W.3d at 880-81.

When a defendant challenges the allegations in a petition that would establish jurisdiction, the standard for reviewing the plea changes. The Garcia II court noted that where a defendant challenges the existence of facts that establish jurisdiction, the standard for reviewing the defendant’s motion mirrors that of a traditional motion for summary judgment. Mission Consol. Ind. School Dist. v. Garcia, 372 S.W.3d 629 (Tex. 2012); Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 228. Under this standard of review, the defendant carries the burden of proof by its assertion that the trial court lacks jurisdiction. Garcia II at 635; Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 228. Once the defendant meets the initial burden to challenge jurisdictional facts, then the plaintiff is required to offer evidence that a disputed material fact exists regarding the challenged jurisdictional issue. Garcia II at 635; Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 228. If a fact issue exists, the trial court should deny the plea to the jurisdiction, but if the relevant evidence is undisputed or the plaintiff fails to raise a fact question on the jurisdictional issues, the trial court must grant the plea to the jurisdiction. Garcia II at 635; Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 229-231.

Furthermore, when immunity from suit and jurisdiction are co-extensive, then submission of evidence regarding the merits of plaintiff’s claims will determine whether claims are dismissed. See Univ. of N. Tex. v. Harvey, 124 S.W.3d 216 (Tex.App.–Fort Worth 2003, pet. denied) (finding jurisdiction as to claims where evidence at hearing established a strong causal connection to plaintiff’s injuries); Tex. Ass’n of Bus. v. Tex. Air Control Bd., 852 S.W.2d 440 (Tex. 1993). Similarly, the Whistleblower suit in Lueck was dismissed when the plaintiff could not show that he had reported a violation of law to an appropriate law enforcement authority. Lueck, 290 S.W.3d at 886; see also Univ. of Houston v. Barth, 403 S.W.3d 851, 858 (Tex. 2013) (dismissing suit when the plaintiff failed to demonstrate that he satisfied the objective prong under the Whistleblower Act because, given his legal training, he could not have believed in good faith that a violation of the administrative policies were violations of “law” or believed in good faith that a report to University administrative personnel was a report to a law enforcement entity). When suit is brought under a statute where immunity from suit and liability are “co-existent, then the plaintiff must offer evidence sufficient to raise fact questions as to each element of liability in order to defeat the plea to the jurisdiction. Lueck, 290 S.W.3d at 880-81. See also Tex. Dep’t. of Transp. v.

Perches, 388 S.W.3d 652, 656 (Tex. 2012)(plaintiff’s pleading was insufficient as a matter of law to assert an ordinary defect claim); Hearts Bluff Game Ranch, Inc., 381 S.W.3d at 482-84 (plaintiff’s pleading must not negate the cause of action).

For example, in Miranda, the Texas Supreme Court held the department’s plea to the jurisdiction should have been granted because evidence established, as a matter of law, that the defendant was not guilty of gross negligence. Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 230; County of Cameron v. Brown, 80 S.W.3d 549, 555. Tex. Natural Res. Conservation Comm’n v. White, 46 S.W.3d 864, 868 (Tex. 2001).

The plaintiff in Miranda was bringing suit under the recreation liability provision of the Tort Claims Act and, as such, she had to establish gross negligence in order to prevail in the suit. Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 229-231. The Parks & Wildlife Department filed a plea to the jurisdiction and specifically denied that there was evidence that it acted with gross negligence. The Texas Supreme Court held that granting the plea was proper because the plaintiff did not offer evidence sufficient to establish a fact issue on whether the department’s conduct constituted gross negligence. *Id.* In ruling on pleas to the jurisdiction and in reviewing rulings on such pleas, the trial courts and appellate courts are required to examine the evidence as to all jurisdictional facts. *Id.*; Bland Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Blue, 34 S.W.3d 547, 555 (Tex. 2000). Thus, where immunity from suit and liability are co-existent, to defeat a plea to the jurisdiction, the plaintiff must plead and offer evidence at least creating a fact issue for each element of liability for the claims and causes of action she is bringing. Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 229-31. See Tex. Dep’t. of Transp. v. Perches, 388 S.W.3d 652, 656 (Tex. 2012)(plaintiff’s pleading was insufficient as a matter of law to assert an ordinary defect claim); Hearts Bluff Game Ranch, Inc., 381 S.W.3d at 482-84 (plaintiff’s pleading must not negate the cause of action).. As previously noted some statutes, such as the TCA and the Whistleblower Act, make the waiver of immunity from suit and immunity from liability co-existent. Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 229-31; See Combs v. City of Webster, 311 S.W.3d 85 (Tex.App—Austin, 2009) (holding that plaintiff has to offer evidence sufficient to establish each element of a breach of contract claim to defeat a motion for summary judgment). Therefore, to establish a waiver of immunity from suit in a Whistleblower claim, the plaintiff must plead and offer evidence sufficient to create a fact issue as to each challenged element of proving liability under the statute at issue. *Id.* In these instances, the trial court must look at whether the plaintiff has plead and, if the plead facts are challenged, offered evidence establishing a waiver of immunity from liability in ruling on a plea to the jurisdiction. *Id.*

However, a court cannot consider pleadings and evidence related to liability where it does not relate to

the determination of jurisdiction. “We have limited the use of a plea to the jurisdiction in these circumstances by holding that such a plea may only be used to address jurisdictional facts.” *Id.* at 880-81.

Like Miranda, the plaintiff in Garcia II was required to offer evidence raising a question of liability in order to survive a plea to the jurisdiction. See Mission Consol. Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Garcia, 372 S.W.3d 629 (Tex. 2012). Ms. Garcia was fired after working for the Mission Consolidated Independent School District for more than 27 years. Garcia filed an employment discrimination suit alleging she was discriminated against based upon her race, national origin, gender, and age. The school district filed a plea to the jurisdiction asserting the Garcia’s pleadings failed to establish a prima facie case for discrimination. In particular, the District attached evidence in support of its plea to the jurisdiction that Garcia was replaced by another Mexican-American woman who was three years older than Garcia. *Id.*

The Court pointed out that where a defendant challenges the existence of facts that establish jurisdiction, the standard for reviewing the defendant’s motion mirrors that of a traditional motion for summary judgment. Garcia II at 635; Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 228. Under this standard of review, the defendant carries the burden of proof by its assertion that the trial court lacks jurisdiction. Garcia II at 635; Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 228. Once the defendant meets the initial burden to challenge jurisdictional facts, then the plaintiff is required to offer evidence that a disputed material fact exists regarding the challenged jurisdictional issue. Garcia II at 635; Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 228. If a fact issue exists, the trial court should deny the plea to the jurisdiction, but if the relevant evidence is undisputed or the plaintiff fails to raise a fact question on the jurisdictional issues, the trial court must grant the plea to the jurisdiction. Garcia II at 635; Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 228.

Ms. Garcia did not submit any evidence in opposition to the plea to the jurisdiction. Furthermore, Ms. Garcia did not seek to continue the hearing on the plea to the jurisdiction or seek discovery in order to gather evidence from which she could submit evidence in opposition to the plea to the jurisdiction. Garcia II at 633.

In considering whether the District’s plea to the jurisdiction should be granted, the Supreme Court first evaluated the elements of a prima facie employment case and the shifting burden of proof followed by federal courts evaluating employment discrimination claims. Garcia II at 635. The Supreme Court pointed out that discrimination, including age discrimination, can be established either by direct evidence or by inference through proof of a prima facie case of discrimination. *Id.* In order to prove a prima facie case of age discrimination, plaintiff must proof that: (1) at

termination her age, sex and/or race placed her within the protected class; (2) she was qualified for her employment position; (3) she was terminated by the employer; and (4) she was replaced by someone who was not within the protected class. The Court pointed out that if a plaintiff, such as Ms. Garcia, cannot establish a prima facie case of discrimination, then she “will simply be limited to the traditional method of proof requiring direct evidence of discriminatory animus.” Garcia II, 372 S.W.3d 629, 635. Because the school district offered evidence which negated the prima facie case of age discrimination (namely that she was not replaced by someone outside of the protected class), Ms. Garcia was obligated to either offer evidence that created a fact issue as to the challenge aspects of proving a prima facie case or offering direct evidence of discriminatory animus in her termination. *See id.* The Court noted that Garcia did not offer any evidence to contest the elements of the prima facie case of discrimination and/or evidence of discriminatory intent in her termination and/or sought a continuance or seek specific discovery, and thus held that the plea to the jurisdiction was proper and should have been granted.

The Supreme Court noted that “trial courts considering a plea to the jurisdiction have broad discretion to allow ‘reasonable opportunity for targeted discovery’ and to grant parties more time to gather evidence and prepare for such a hearing.” Garcia II, 372 S.W.3d 629, 642-643 (quoting Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 235-36.)

Both the trial court and the court of appeals must construe the pleadings in plaintiff’s favor and look to plaintiff’s intent in determining if plaintiff sought to plead an immunity from suit. Brown, 80 S.W.3d at 555; Tex. Ass’n of Bus. v. Tex. Air Control, 852 S.W.2d 440, 446 (Tex. 1993). In other words, the courts are obligated to construe the pleadings liberally in the plaintiff’s favor in determining whether, as plead, there is a waiver of immunity from suit. Tex. Dep’t of Transp. v. Ramirez, 74 S.W.3d 864, 867 (Tex 2002). If evidence is submitted, the trial court must take as true all evidence favorable to the plaintiff and indulge every inference and resolve any doubts in the plaintiff’s favor. Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 225-26. *But see* Creedmoor-Maha Water Supply Corp., 307 S.W.3d at 513, fn.4 (“[a] somewhat different standard applies when a challenge to a jurisdictional fact’s existence does not implicate the merits [of plaintiff’s claims]”).

The deferential standard of reviewing a plaintiff’s pleadings and evidence does not extend to the construction of the underlying statute that is alleged to have waived immunity—that is construed in favor of finding no waiver of immunity from suit and, thus, in favor of the governmental defendant. Taylor, at 701.

The trial court has discretion on whether to resolve jurisdiction at a preliminary hearing or await a fuller development of the merits. Bland v. Blue, 34 S.W.3d

557, 554 (Tex. 2000). The trial court has a duty to determine whether it has jurisdiction at its earliest opportunity considering the circumstances of the particular case, before allowing the litigation to proceed. *Id.* at 226. Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 226. When the determination of jurisdiction requires the trial court to hear evidence, the court should allow time for development of the case, but mindful that the jurisdictional issue should be resolved as quickly as possible. *Id.* at 228. However a trial court should not delay a ruling on a plea to the jurisdiction when discovery is not necessary. In re Hays County Sheriff’s Department, 2012 WL 6554815 (Tex.App.—Austin 2012)(Pemberton, J, concurring)(trial court abused its discretion when it chose to withhold a ruling on a plea to the jurisdiction until after some discovery was completed, where discovery was not necessary for ruling on plea). *See also* City of Galveston v. Gray, 93 S.W.3d 587, 590 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2002, pet denied)(trial court abused discretion in ordering mediation and not ruling on plea to the jurisdiction).

When the evidence presented by the parties in connection with the plea to the jurisdiction creates fact questions regarding the jurisdictional issues, then the trial court must deny the plea and allow the fact issues to be resolved by the fact finder at trial. *Id.* at 226-27. *But see* Creedmoor, 307 S.W.3d at 513, fn.4, (if the question of fact does not implicate juris, then Court and not jury resolves the issue). If the relevant evidence is undisputed or fails to create a fact issue on the jurisdictional question, the trial court rules on the plea as a matter of law. Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 228.

Because the courts will look at both the pleadings and the evidence offered at the hearing, plaintiffs and defendants must carefully analyze the evidence that they will offer at a plea to the jurisdiction hearing. In many cases, plea to the jurisdiction hearings are becoming mini trials, similar to the old plea of privilege hearings. For example, in Durbin v. City of Winnsboro, 135 S.W.3d 317, 321-25 (Tex.App. –Texarkana 2004, pet. denied), the court of appeals found the trial court had jurisdiction only after reviewing extensive deposition testimony offered by the plaintiffs and defendants at the plea hearing. This case exemplifies the importance the evidence offered at the plea hearing will have in determining whether the plaintiff’s claims are forever barred based on immunity from suit. *Id.* *See* Harris County v. Sykes, 136 S.W.3d 635 (Tex. 2004). *But see* Lueck, 290 S.W.3d 876, 884 (“if a plea to the jurisdiction requires the trial court to wade deeply into the lawsuit’s merits, it is not a valid plea.”).

The court’s ruling on the plea to the jurisdiction is not limited to the question of whether the plaintiff has plead a viable basis for waiver from immunity from suit. If the court determines that the plaintiff’s pleadings are insufficient to allege a waiver of immunity from suit, the

court must then decide whether to allow the plaintiff to re-plead. The Supreme Court has repeatedly restated the standard: if the pleadings cannot be repleaded because, on their face, the facts alleged preclude or negate the existence of jurisdiction, then the plea to the jurisdiction may be granted without allowing the plaintiff an opportunity to amend. Lueck, 290 S.W.3d at 884-85. (plaintiff’s allegations in petition negated his ability to prove a Whistleblower Act claim and therefore no reason to give him an opportunity to replead); See Texas Dep’t of Crim. Justice v. Campos, 384 S.W.3d 810, 815-16 (where plaintiffs have amended their pleadings three times over 9 years after the first plea to the jurisdiction was filed, then they have had adequate opportunity to amend their pleadings to assert claims for which immunity has been waived and the case should be dismissed); Tex. A&M Univ. Sys. v. Koseoglu, 233 S.W.3d 835 (Tex. 2007); Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 227. This bar is equally applicable to the Tort Claims Act. Harris Cty. v. Annab, No. 17-0329, 2018 Tex. LEXIS 402 (Tex. May 11, 2018) (plaintiff’s failure to establish any viable legal theory that would show waiver under TCA precluded her right to replead). Even where it appears the plaintiff could amend pleadings to state a claim for injunctive relief, a majority of the Texas Supreme Court held dismissal was appropriate where the plaintiff had sought monetary relief in its pleadings. Tomball Reg’l Hosp., 283 S.W.3d at 849.

## **B. Methods and means plaintiffs are using to avoid put-off rulings on immunity.**

Over the last 10 years, the most significant changes in litigation against governmental entities and their employees/officials has been governmental entities’ use of the plea to the jurisdiction as a means of raising immunity from suit early in litigation. As noted elsewhere in this paper, whenever a plea to the jurisdiction is based upon the plaintiff’s pleadings, then no evidence is presented at the hearing and as a result, no discovery is needed before the court rules upon the plea to the jurisdiction. Creedmoor-Maha Water Supply Corp v. Texas Comm’n on Environmental Quality, 307 S.W.3d 505 (Tex.App.—Austin 2010, no pet); City of Galveston v. Gray, 93 S.W.3d 587, 590 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2002, pet denied); In re Hays County Sheriff’s Department, 2012 WL 6554815 (Tex.App.—Austin 2012)(Pemberton, J, concurring).

Plaintiffs are now using three means to get discovery for their claims prior to a defendant obtaining a ruling on a plea to the jurisdiction. First, some plaintiffs are using the Public Information Act, formerly known as the Open Records Act, which is codified in Chapter 552 of the Texas Gov’t Code, to get discovery in the form of documents from a governmental entity. The PIA can be a very effective means of getting pre-suit discovery, but it is limited to obtaining copies of documents currently in existence. The Public

Information Act cannot be used to require a governmental entity to create documents or answer questions. A&T Consultants, Inc. v. Sharp, 904 S.W.2d 668, 676 (Tex. 1995); Dallas Indep. Sch. Dist., 31 S.W.3d 678, 681 (Tex.App.—Eastland 2000, pet. denied); Open Records Decision No. 563 at 8 (1990). The Public Information Act includes a provision which prohibits the use of the Act for the purpose of gathering information related to a matter in litigation or for which litigation is reasonably anticipated. Tex. Gov’t. Code section 552.103(a). In order to assert this exception to disclosure under the Public Information Act, a governmental entity must establish that it subjectively believes litigation is likely, and there are objective facts which establish litigation is reasonably anticipated. Tex.Gov’t Code section 552.103(a).

The second means that plaintiffs have used to obtain discovery prior to a governmental entity’s filing a plea to the jurisdiction based on immunity, is Texas Rule of Civil Procedure 202 which authorizes pre-suit discovery in certain limited circumstances. Texas Rule of Civil Procedure 202 authorizes the taking of depositions prior to filing suit for one of two reasons: (1) to perpetuate or obtain the person’s own testimony or that of any other person for use in an anticipated suit; or (2) to investigate a potential claim or suit. Tex.R.Civ.P 202.1 The first justification for using Rule 202 arises when the death of a witness, or another event making the deponent unavailable in the future, is anticipated. The second justification for discovery under Rule 202 is used to develop information about potential defendants or to obtain information about the proper party to serve. *Id.* Under Rule 202, to authorize a pre-suit deposition, the trial court must find that: (1) allowing the petitioner to take the requested deposition may prevent a failure or delay of justice in an anticipated suit; or (2) the likely benefit of allowing the petitioner to take the requested deposition to investigate a potential claim outweighs the burden or expense of the procedure. In re Hochheim Prairie Farm Mut. Ins. Assoc., et al., 115 S.W.3d 793 (Tex.App.—Beaumont 2003, no pet.).

Four courts of appeals have held that immunity from suit will not prohibit a governmental entity giving discovery pursuant to Rule 202 if the discovery relates to claims that the plaintiff may have against a third party. See University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center v. Tcholakia, 2012 WL 4465349 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2012). See also City of Houston v. U.S. Filter Wastewater Group, Inc., 190 S.W.3d 242 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2006, no pet.); City of Willow Park v. Squaw Creek Downs, L.P., 166 S.W.3d 336, 340 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 2005, no pet) and In re Dallas County Hosp. Dist., 2014 WL 1407415, \*3 (Tex.App.—Dallas April 1, 2014, no pet.). However, the Austin Court of Appeals has held that immunity from suit bars Rule 202 suits against governmental

entities. Combs v. Texas Civil Rights Project, 410 S.W.3d 529, 533 Tex.App.—Austin 2013, no pet.)

Finally, plaintiffs have either sought to continue hearings on pleas to the jurisdiction or ask courts to delay rulings on pleas to the jurisdiction so they can conduct necessary discovery. Where discovery is appropriate and needed for court to rule on jurisdiction, allowing discovery is proper. However, where a governmental entity’s plea to the jurisdiction is based upon the plaintiff’s pleadings, delaying a ruling on the plea and/or allowing time to conduct discovery constitutes an abuse of the trial court’s discretion for which mandamus is an appropriate remedy. In the City of Galveston decision, the Fourteenth Court of Appeals ruled that a trial court abuses its discretion if it orders mediation be conducted prior to a ruling on a plea to the jurisdiction based upon the plaintiff’s pleadings. City of Galveston v. Gray, 93 S.W.3d 587, 592 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2002, orig. proc. The Austin Court of Appeals has similarly held that the trial court abuses its discretion by ordering discovery to go forward and unreasonably delaying a ruling on a plea to the jurisdiction. See In re Hays County Sheriff’s Department, 2012 WL 6554815. Again, the plea to the jurisdiction in that case was predicated upon inadequacies in the plaintiff’s pleadings as opposed to challenging whether the plaintiff could prove facts sufficient to establish a waiver of immunity from suit.

### C. Trial Courts Are Obligated to Promptly Rule on Pleas to the Jurisdiction Based on Immunity.

A trial court’s failure to rule on a pending matter within a reasonable amount of time constitutes an abuse of discretion. See In re Shredder Co., 225 S.W.3d 676, 679 (Tex.App.—El Paso 2006, orig. proceeding). When a motion is properly filed and pending before the trial court, the act of considering and ruling on that motion is a ministerial act, and mandamus may issue to compel the trial court to act. In re Chavez, 62 S.W.3d 225, 228 (Tex.App.—Amarillo 2001, orig. proceeding); Safety-Kleen Corp. v. Garcia, 945 S.W.2d 268, 269 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1997, orig. proceeding).

“[N]o bright-line demarcates the boundaries of a reasonable time period.” In re Chavez, 62 S.W.3d at 228. Whether a reasonable time for ruling has lapsed is dependent on the circumstances of each case. In re Blakeney, 254 S.W.3d 659, 662 (Tex.App.—Texarkana 2008, orig. proceeding); In re Chavez, 62 S.W.3d at 228. Reasonableness of the time taken to rule on a plea to the jurisdiction is dependent upon a various circumstances including whether the trial court had actual knowledge of the motion, its overt refusal to act, the state of its docket, and the existence of other judicial and administrative matters which must be addressed first. In re Chavez, 62 S.W.3d at 228-29.

The trial court in In Re Hays County withheld any ruling on the plea to the jurisdiction until discovery

would show whether the defendants waived immunity from suit in a breach of contract case by their conduct. In re Hays County Sheriff’s Department, 2012 WL 6554815. The Austin Court analyzed the history of waiver of immunity cases and concluded that it was impossible to find a set of facts under which a governmental entity can be held to have waived immunity from suit in a contract case by its conduct. *Id.* Therefore the court found that, “[b]ecause this Court does not recognize the waiver-by-conduct exception asserted by [plaintiff], there can be no factual dispute in need of resolution with respect to this theory. The trial court abused its discretion in deferring its ruling on the County’s plea to the jurisdiction in order to allow discovery on this ground.” *Id.*

Additionally, Austin Court held that the trial court’s waiting more than thirteen-month to rule on the plea to the jurisdiction was unreasonable. *Id.* See City of Galveston v. Gray, 93 S.W.3d 587, 592 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2002, orig. proceeding) (thirteen-month delay on ruling on plea to jurisdiction was abuse of discretion).

### D. Interlocutory Appeals From Rulings on Immunity.

An interlocutory appeal can be taken from a ruling on sovereign immunity regardless of the type of motion (plea to the jurisdiction, motion to dismiss or motion for summary judgment) through which immunity from suit is raised. Tex.Civ.Prac. & Rem.Code § 51.D14(a); Austin State Hosp. v. Graham, 347 S.W.3d 298 (Tex. 2011). Because section 51.014(a) gives appellate court’s jurisdiction over interlocutory appeals from rulings on sovereign immunity from pleas to the jurisdiction, motions to dismiss and motions for summary judgment, if a valid interlocutory appeal is otherwise taken sovereign immunity can be raised for the first time on appeal.

Graham brought suit against Austin State Hospital and two of its doctors alleging medical malpractice claims. *Id.* at 299. Because Graham sued both the hospital and two employees, the hospital moved to dismiss the doctors pursuant to Texas Civil Practice and Remedies Code § 101.106(e). *Id.* The doctors also moved to dismiss under sections 101.106(a) and (e). *Id.* Graham then nonsuited the hospital and asserted that its motion to dismiss was thereby mooted. The trial court denied the doctors’ motion and did not rule on the hospital’s motion. *Id.* The hospital and the doctors appealed and the Court of Appeals held that it did not have jurisdiction over the doctors’ appeal because section 51.041(a) of the Civil Practice and Remedies Code allowed the doctors to appeal only from a denial of a motion for summary judgment. *Id.* at 300.

The Supreme Court held that section 51.014 allows appeals by governmental entities or their employees



where a motion in the trial court challenged that court’s jurisdiction. *Id.*

“[W]e have held under section 51.014(a) that an interlocutory appeal may be taken from a refusal to dismiss for want of jurisdiction whether the jurisdictional argument is presented by plea to the jurisdiction or some other vehicle such as a motion for summary judgment. . . . if the trial court denies the governmental entity’s claim of no jurisdiction, whether it has been asserted by a plea to the jurisdiction, a motion for summary judgment, or otherwise, the Legislature has provided that an interlocutory appeal may be brought. The reference to plea to the jurisdiction is not a particular vehicle but the substance of the issue raised.”

*Id.* (internal quotations and citations omitted). The Court explained that there is no reason for limiting appeals under section 51.014(a)(5) which references “motions for summary judgment”, when section 51.014(a)(8) is not so limited. *Id.* The Texas Supreme Court concluded, “[t]he point of section 51.014(a)(5) . . . is to allow an interlocutory appeal from rulings on certain issues, not merely rulings in certain forms. Therefore, we hold that an appeal may be taken from orders denying an assertion of immunity . . . regardless of the procedural device used.” *Id.* at 301.

Any appeal from the ruling on a plea to the jurisdiction is conducted under a de novo standard of review. Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 225-26; Mayhem v. Town of Sunnyvale, 964 S.W.2d 922, 928 (Tex. 1998).

While courts are not to look to the merits of a claim unless immunity from suit and liability are co-extensive under the statute at issue, the courts frequently look to the existence of a dispute regarding a contractor’s performance in ruling on a plea to the jurisdiction and breach of contract cases. In reviewing rulings on pleas to the jurisdiction in breach of contract cases, the Texas Supreme Court has consistently noted and based its ruling in part on the fact that the governmental entity alleges the contract or plaintiff has breached the terms of the contract to some extent or degree. See Pelzel, 77 S.W.3d 251, 252; IT-Davy, 74 S.W.3d at 852. Then in the Pelzel case, the Supreme Court pointed out that it would not find a waiver of immunity from suit where a governmental entity reduces the contract price under the express terms of the agreement, “even if the propriety of that adjustment is disputed.” Pelzel, 77 S.W.3d at 252. While the court is not supposed to weigh the merits of the case in ruling on a plea to the jurisdiction, clearly allegations that a contractor has breached the contract or failed to perform on a contract are critical to defeating any claim of waiver by conduct in a breach of contract case. A lawyer bringing a plea to the jurisdiction in a

case where waiver by conduct is alleged should plead and offer evidence that the contractor has breached and/or failed to perform its contractual obligations.

#### **E. Is sovereign immunity jurisdictional and can it be raised for the first time on appeal?**

In Rusk State Hospital v. Black, the Texas Supreme Court addressed the issue of whether the defense of sovereign immunity, specifically immunity from suit, could be raised for the first time before an appellate court during an interlocutory appeal. 392 S.W.3d 88 (Tex. 2012). The Court’s decision in Rusk, that immunity from suit could be raised for the first time in an appellate court during an interlocutory appeal, will have significant implications for a very limited number of cases. However, the Court’s decision, including a concurring opinion filed by Justice Hecht, as well as a concurring and dissenting opinion by Justice Lehrmann, joined by Chief Justice Jefferson and Justice Medina, focus on whether immunity from suit impacts a trial court’s subject-matter jurisdiction or personal jurisdiction. *Id.* at 94, 103-04, 107.

The Black family brought suit against the state hospital arising from the death of their son Travis Black, a psychiatric in-patient at the hospital. Black was found unconscious with a plastic bag over his head. *Id.* at 91-92. Efforts to resuscitate Black failed and an autopsy revealed that he died of asphyxiation. Travis’s parents brought a healthcare liability suit as well as claims under the TCA against the Rusk State Hospital as well as alleging three different bases for liability under the TCA. With respect to their claims under the TCA, the Blacks first asserted that the hospital was negligent for providing or allowing Travis Black to have access to a plastic bag. Second, the Blacks alleged that the hospital was negligent in training and supervising employees, which resulted in their son’s death from assisted suicide or murder. Third, the Blacks alleged that the hospital was deliberately indifferent to their son’s need by depriving him of sleep and refusing to prescribe appropriate medication. *Id.*

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 74 of the Civil Practice & Remedies Code, the Medical Liability Act, the Blacks served the hospital with an expert report at the commencement of suit. *Id.* The hospital moved to dismiss the suit on the basis that the medical reports provided by the Blacks failed to satisfy the statutory requirements of Section 74.351 of the Tex.Civ.Prac. & Rem.Code. *Id.* The trial court denied the hospital’s motion to dismiss and the hospital took an interlocutory appeal under Section 51.014 of the Tex.Civ.Prac. & Rem.Code. *Id.* at 91. Section 51.014 of the Tex.Civ.Prac. & Rem.Code authorizes an interlocutory appeal to be taken from motions that deny or grant relief regarding the adequacy and sufficiency of an expert report filed in connection with a medical liability suit. See Tex.Civ.Prac. & Rem.Code

§ 51.014(9). However, Section 51.014 of the Civil Practice & Remedies Code also authorizes interlocutory appeals to be taken from the granting or denying of pleas to the jurisdiction filed by a governmental unit subject to the TCA. See Tex.Civ.Prac. & Rem.Code §51.014(8).

At the court of appeals, the hospital argued that the trial court erred in denying its motion to dismiss regarding the sufficiency of the plaintiff’s expert’s reports but also asserted sovereign immunity as a separate basis for reversing the trial court and rendering a judgment of dismissal. Specifically, the hospital argued that the Blacks’ pleadings did not allege a cause of action for which the hospital’s immunity had been waived and thus, they had failed to meet their burden of establishing that the trial court had jurisdiction. The Blacks responded that the court of appeals could not consider the hospital’s immunity argument because that argument was neither raised at nor addressed by the trial court. The court of appeals did not address the immunity issue because it had not been presented to nor ruled on by the trial court. The court of appeals also denied the hospital’s appeal with respect to its seeking dismissal for the inadequacy of the medical expert’s reports. The hospital appealed to the Texas Supreme Court, asserting that because sovereign immunity deprived the trial court of subject-matter jurisdiction it could be raised for the first time at the court of appeals in an interlocutory appeal. *Id.* at 91-92.

The majority began its analysis by noting that the Court had previously held that standing and ripeness could first be raised on appeal. *Id.* at 94. (citing Waco Independent School District v. Gibson, 22 S.W.3d 849, 851 (Tex. 2000)). The court noted that its holding in Gibson was based on its prior decision in Texas Association of Businesses v. Texas Air Control Board, 852 S.W.2d 440, 445 (Tex. 1993) holding, “that because subject-matter jurisdiction is essential to the authority of a court to decide a case it cannot be waived and may be raised for the first time on appeal.” *Id.* The majority acknowledged that the issues in Gibson, standing and ripeness, as well as the issues raised in Texas Association of Businesses, subject-matter jurisdiction, were different than the issue first raised by Rusk State Hospital, namely sovereign immunity. *Id.* The court, however, found that these differences did not dictate a different outcome. *Id.*

The majority of the court then addressed the scope of jurisdiction for interlocutory appeals granted by Section 51.014 of the Civil Practice and Remedies Code. The supreme court noted that the court of appeals’ holding found that Section 51.014 precluded a court of appeals’ hearing an interlocutory appeal “from reviewing an immunity claim that was neither raised nor ruled upon in the trial court. *Id.* The supreme court rejected this reasoning holding that:

The inquiry is not whether Section 51.014(a) *grants* appellate court authority to review immunity claims; rather it is whether Section 51.014(a) *divests* appellate courts of such authority. We conclude it does not.

*Id.* (italics in original).

The supreme court next noted that it had previously held in numerous other cases that sovereign immunity deprives courts of subject-matter jurisdiction:

It has been suggested that while immunity *implicates* subject-matter jurisdiction, it does not necessarily equate to a lack of subject-matter jurisdiction....But regardless of whether immunity equates to a lack of subject-matter jurisdiction for all purposes, it implicates a court’s subject-matter jurisdiction over pending claims. So if a governmental entity validly asserts that it is immune from a pending claim, any court decision regarding that claim is advisory to the extent it addresses issues other than immunity, and the Texas Constitution does not afford court’s jurisdiction to make advisory decisions or issue advisory opinions.

*Id.* at 95. (citing Valley Baptist Med. Ctr. v. Gonzalez, 33 S.W.3d 821, 822 (Tex. 2000)). Next the court notes that Section 51.014(a) of the Civil Practice & Remedies Code expands the jurisdiction of courts of appeals allowing a litigant to take an immediate appeal where a final judgment has not been rendered. *Id.* The court then points out that the court of appeals’ holding would “affectively construe Section 51.014(a) to require appellate courts to address the merits of cases without regard to whether the court has jurisdiction. That construction violates constitutional principles.” *Id.* Thus, the supreme court concludes:

[I]f immunity is first asserted on interlocutory appeal, section 51.014(a) does not preclude the appellate court from having to consider the issue at the outset in order to determine whether it has jurisdiction to address the merits.

*Id.* As an additional justification for its holding, the court points out that upon remand to the trial court the governmental entity will immediately raise sovereign immunity which, “would work against the main purpose of the interlocutory appeal statute, which is to increase sufficiency of the judicial process.” *Id.* at 96. See Dallas Metrocare Svcs v. Juarez, 420 S.W.3d 39, 41-42 (Tex. 2013); Dallas County v. Logan, 407 S.W.3d 745 (Tex. 2014);

In his concurring opinion, Justice Hecht stated that he joined in the majority opinion because, “I agree that immunity from suit ‘sufficiently partakes of the nature of a jurisdictional bar’ that it must be considered on interlocutory appeal, even if not raised in the trial court.” Rusk State Hosp., 392 S.W.3d at 101. (Hecht concurring). Like the majority, Hecht points out that if immunity were ultimately established by the governmental entity, then any decision on the merits of hospital’s appeal regarding whether the Black’s medical reports were adequate under the Texas Medical Liability Act would be advisory and would be outside the court of appeals’ jurisdiction as established by the Texas Constitution. *Id.* He also agreed with the majority that remanding a case so that jurisdiction could be considered by the trial court only to result in another interlocutory appeal would be a waste of time, judicial resources, and cost litigant more in attorney fees. *Id.*

Hecht then offers his opinion on whether sovereign immunity deprives a court of subject, type and matter jurisdiction. Hecht acknowledged that the Texas Supreme Court’s opinion in Texas Department of Transportation v. Jones has created confusion regarding the impact that sovereign immunity has on a trial court’s jurisdiction. Hecht notes that the Court stated “‘the law in Texas has been that absent the state’s consent to suit, a trial court lacks subject matter jurisdiction.’” *Id.* at 102 citing Texas Department of Transportation v. Jones, 8 S.W.3d 636, 638 (Tex.1999) (per curiam). Hecht then explains that the issue in Jones was whether immunity from suit could be asserted in a plea to the jurisdiction and not the nature of whether immunity deprives the trial court or any court of subject-matter jurisdiction. *Id.* Thus, Hecht concludes, “Jones cannot fairly be read to equate immunity from suit with a lack of subject-matter jurisdiction.” *Id.* (Hecht concurring).

Hecht points out that there are important differences between immunity from suit and lack of subject-matter jurisdiction. According to Hecht the most important difference is that a governmental entity can waive immunity from suit either for broad classes of claims or for a particular case, but no litigant can waive subject-matter jurisdiction. *Id.* Hecht then seeks to explain any inconsistencies in the court’s prior rulings by concluding that, “Jurisdiction, it has been observed, is a word of many, too many, meanings. Not all of them have been or can be attributed to immunity from suit.” *Id.* (Hecht concurring)(internal quotations omitted).

Justice Lehrmann, joined by Chief Justice Jefferson and Justice Medina, issued an opinion concurring in part and dissenting in part. Justice Lehrmann begins by stating that a trial court cannot exercise jurisdiction over a case unless it has both subject-matter jurisdiction and personal jurisdiction. *Id.* at 103. (Lehrmann concurring and dissenting). The Justice next points out that subject-matter jurisdiction involves the court’s power to hear and resolve a matter

and cannot be waived or granted by the parties. She further notes that all courts, trial courts as well as courts of appeals, are obligated to consider subject-matter jurisdiction *sua sponte*. *Id.* (Lehrmann concurring and dissenting).

Justice Lehrmann next compared the differences between subject-matter jurisdiction and personal jurisdiction.

“In contrast, personal jurisdiction involves a court’s power to bind a particular party. Unlike subject-matter jurisdiction, personal jurisdiction can be voluntarily waived by an appearance.”

*Id.* (Lehrmann concurring and dissenting).

Lehrmann then explores the history of sovereign immunity back to the English kings and the formation of the United States. She notes that sovereign immunity was frequently referred to as impacting a court’s ability to render a judgment against a king or sovereign. She also points out the sovereign immunity implicates a governmental entities “amenability” to suit. *Id.* at 105. (Lehrmann concurring and dissenting). “[A]menability” from suit is more properly referred to as an element of personal jurisdiction, which can be waived by a party.” *Id.* (Lehrmann concurring and dissenting). Lehrmann then asserts that sovereign immunity cannot implicate subject-matter jurisdiction, because courts in Texas all have subject-matter jurisdiction over tort claims and breach of contract claims, which are the claims typically brought against governmental entities. *Id.* (Lehrmann concurring and dissenting). Lehrmann points out that if sovereign immunity implicates subject-matter jurisdiction, then a governmental entity could always attack any judgment properly rendered it against on appeal by arguing that the trial court lacked subject-matter jurisdiction. *Id.* at 108. (Lehrmann concurring and dissenting).

Ultimately, Lehrmann concludes that governmental entities should not be allowed to assert immunity for the first time on an appeal in the event of an interlocutory appeal. *Id.* (Lehrmann concurring and dissenting). She points out that one of the purposes of sovereign immunity is to reduce costs and expenses for governmental entities by allowing them to avoid unnecessary litigation through asserting immunity early in the litigation. *Id.* at 109. (Lehrmann concurring and dissenting). She notes that this purpose is:

...[I]l-served by allowing immunity to be raised post-judgment, possibly even years after the litigation has ended....When attorneys for the State fail to raise sovereign immunity in the trial court, that failure might not be based on oversight. The State’s attorneys often make tactical decisions in

deciding which issues they choose to raise. By not requiring the State to raise the issue of sovereign immunity in the trial court, the Court is providing it with a strategic advantage that other parties lack. Moreover, such a lenient rule penalizes taxpayers by dissuading conscientious attorneys for the state from developing procedures to ensure that the matter is raised timely...resulting in unnecessary and costly litigation. Second, the doctrine should not result in one law for the sovereign and another for the subject, as such a rule would look less like sovereign immunity than sovereign inequity.

*Id.* (Lehrmann concurring and dissenting) (internal quotations and citations omitted).

While immunity can be raised on appeal, it is important to note that it is not a basis for collateral attack on a final judgment. In Engelman Irrigation Dist. v. Shields Bros., Inc., 514 S.W.3d 746 (Tex. Mar. 17, 2017), the Court considered a governmental entity’s request to void a prior judgment for breach-of-contract based on changed precedent involving governmental immunity. *Id.* at 748. The Court held that while judicial decisions on issues like immunity applied retroactively, it did not allow the reopening of a judgment where all appeals had been exhausted. *Id.* at 749. Accordingly, res judicata applied to bar a collateral attack on a sovereign immunity basis. *Id.* at 750.

1. Potential resolutions of the immunity issue when it is first raised on appeal in an interlocutory appeal.

After determining that immunity could first be raised on appeal in an interlocutory appeal, the supreme court then had to address the Hospital’s assertion that the Blacks’ claims were barred by immunity from suit. The court held that a plaintiff must be given fair opportunity to address jurisdictional issues by amending its pleadings or developing the record when the assertion of immunity is not raised at the trial court. The court cited its decision in Gibson as holding that safeguards are necessary to protect a plaintiff when an appellate court considers an issue of subject, type and matter jurisdiction in the first instance because the plaintiff had not had the opportunity to amend their pleadings in response to the jurisdictional challenge. *Id.* “Under such circumstances, appellate courts must construe the pleadings in favor of the party asserting jurisdiction, and, if necessary, review the record for evidence supporting jurisdiction.” *Id.* at 96

The Supreme Court holds that where immunity is raised for the first time in an interlocutory appeal, the appellate will reach one of four decisions. First, the appellate court may find that the pleadings or record conclusively negate the existence of jurisdiction in which case the suit should be dismissed. *Id.* Second,

if the pleadings and record neither demonstrate jurisdiction nor conclusively negate it, then in order to obtain dismissal of the plaintiff’s claim, the defendant entity has the burden to show either that the plaintiff failed to show jurisdiction despite having had a full opportunity in the trial court to develop the record and amend pleadings; or, if such opportunity was not given, that the plaintiff would be unable to show the existence of jurisdiction if the cause were remanded to the trial court and such opportunity afforded. If the governmental entity meets this burden, then the appellate court should dismiss the plaintiff’s case.

*Id.* The third and final outcome is where the pleadings and record do not conclusively negate the existence of jurisdiction and the governmental entity does not meet the burden of showing the plaintiff was afforded the opportunity to amend pleadings and develop a record, or the plaintiff would be unable to show the existence of jurisdiction if afforded the opportunity; then the case should be remanded to the trial court for further proceedings. *Id.*

The Supreme Court concluded that the Black case would be remanded for further proceedings on jurisdictional issues because the hospital had not conclusively established by the record that the Blacks had had a full and fair opportunity to develop the record as to jurisdiction or amend their pleadings. *Id.*

2. The Practical Effect of the Rusk State Hospital Decision.

The Supreme Court’s decision in Rusk State Hospital will have a significant impact on a limited number of cases. As allowed in Rusk, in those instances where governmental entities take an interlocutory appeal, the issue of immunity can still be raised on appeal, either in the courts of appeal or the Texas Supreme Court, regardless of whether it was ever raised at the trial court or the court of appeals. *Id.* While this is a significant result, it will have an impact only in a limited number of instances, because there are only a limited number of cases where interlocutory appeals are authorized to be taken on an issue other than immunity. Indeed, based upon the reported decisions, the vast majority of interlocutory appeals are taken from the granting or denial of pleas to the jurisdiction or summary judgments based upon immunity from suit.

Interestingly, the Rusk State Hospital case may raise the question of whether immunity can be addressed by an appellate court considering a petition for writ of mandamus. A governmental entity may argue that when an appellate court chooses to grant a petition for writ of mandamus to consider a case, it should then consider the issue of immunity in resolving the mandamus

application. Indeed, the Austin Court of Appeals did just that in In Re Hays County Sheriff’s Department, 2012 WL 6554815 (Tex.App.—Austin December 12, 2012). In In Re Hays County Sheriff’s Department, the petitioner brought an application for writ of mandamus based upon the trial court’s refusal to rule on its plea to the jurisdiction. *Id.* The trial court judge had withheld any ruling on the plea to the jurisdiction pending discovery in the case. The petitioner argued that the trial court was obligated to rule on the plea to the jurisdiction, grant or deny, because the plea was based upon the plaintiff’s live pleading. *Id.* Ultimately, the court of appeals addressed the merits of the plaintiff’s claim and whether he could establish a waiver-by-conduct that would give rise to a breach of contract action, in deciding to conditionally grant the writ of mandamus. *Id.* at 4. Interestingly, in his concurring opinion, Justice Bob Pemberton pointed out that because the county’s plea to the jurisdiction challenged only the sufficiency of the plaintiff’s pleadings, the question of whether there was a waiver of immunity constituted a question of law for which the existence of additional facts learned through discovery would have no bearing. *Id.* (Pemberton concurring). Pemberton went on to point out that it was unnecessary for the majority to analyze whether the plaintiff could articulate a waiver-by-conduct breach of contract claim in resolving whether to grant the writ of mandamus. *Id.* at 5. (Pemberton concurring). The practical effect of this decision, is that it evidences that courts of appeals may consider immunity issues in resolving interlocutory appeals and writs of mandamus. *See Id.*

However, mandamus relief may be appropriate against the court of appeals itself if it abuses its discretion in granting mandamus relief for jurisdictional issues. The Supreme Court recently addressed this question in In re Lazy W District No. 1, 493 S.W.3d 538 (Tex. 2016). In In re Lazy W District No. 1, a water district filed a petition in condemnation to acquire land controlled by a municipal utility district by eminent domain, and sought the appointment of special commissioners to determine the value of a proposed easement. *Id.* at 540. The municipal district asserted its immunity in a plea to the jurisdiction, and successfully requested the appointment of the commissioners be vacated. *Id.* at 541. The water district responded by seeking mandamus relief in the court of appeals, which was granted. *Id.* On appeal from the grant of mandamus relief, the municipal district sought mandamus against the court of appeals. *Id.* The water district contended that the plea to the jurisdiction could not be heard until after the commissioners were appointed. *Id.* at 543. The Court disagreed, concluding that the trial court did not abuse its discretion in hearing the plea to the jurisdiction prior to the appointment of the commissioners, and accordingly the court of appeals abused its discretion in granting mandamus relief. *Id.* at 544.

## F. Impact on Statute of Limitations Where the Court Lacks Jurisdiction.

In the event that the plea to the jurisdiction is granted, section 16.064 of the Texas Civil Practice and Remedies Code tolls the statute of limitations for cases dismissed for want of jurisdiction, provided the case is refiled in a court of proper jurisdiction within sixty days of dismissal. Tex.Civ.Prac. & Rem.Code § 16.064(a); In re United Serv. Auto. Ass’n., 307 S.W.3d at 304. However, the tolling provision does not apply to cases in which the first filing was made with “intentional disregard of proper jurisdiction.” TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE section 16.064(a); In re United Servs. Auto. Ass’n., 307 S.W.3d at 304. Once a party seeks relief asserting that a suit was filed with intentional disregard of proper jurisdiction, the non-movant bears the burden proving the filing was made in good faith. *Id.* at 312-13. The Supreme Court concluded that the burden of proof rests with the non-movant because he is in the better position of establishing the factors that lead to the decision as to in which court suit should be filed. *Id.* The standard of proof is similar to the standard of proof for setting aside a default judgment. *Id.* at 313. A plaintiff’s mistake about the court’s jurisdiction will “never” meet the test of intentional disregard. *Id.* As the Supreme Court observed, “[c]apable lawyers often made good faith mistakes about the jurisdiction of Texas courts.” *Id.* (internal quotations omitted). However, a party is charged with intentional disregard when a lawyer or party makes a strategic decision to seek relief from a court without jurisdiction. *Id.* Dismissals resulting from an attorney’s “tactical decisions” were not meant to be protected by the tolling provision of section 16.064(a). *Id.* (dismissal for want of jurisdiction was final and statute of limitations had run where plaintiff unquestionably sought damages in excess of the trial court’s jurisdictional limits).

Governmental defendants are not required to raise lack of jurisdiction through special exceptions and/or summary judgment before seeking to have the case dismissed through a plea to the jurisdiction. Lueck, 290 S.W.3d at 884.

Because an order granting a plea to the jurisdiction may constitute a final judgment and may also bar litigation against other defendants arising from the same events, a plaintiff may want to dismiss the suit before the court rules on the plea.

While immunity from suit is properly raised through a plea to the jurisdiction, the proper procedural tool for obtaining a judgment for immunity from liability short of trial is summary judgment. *See Maxwell*, 880 S.W.2d at 464; *Harris*, 799 S.W.2d at 788. To prevail on a motion for summary judgment, the governmental entity must establish that there are no disputed issues of material fact and it is entitled to judgment as a matter of law. *Id.* In cases where jurisdictional facts are intertwined with the merits and

an adequate time for discovery has passed, a defendant may also submit a no-evidence motion for summary judgment predicated upon the plaintiff’s inability to prove facts necessary to establish a waiver of sovereign immunity. Town of Shady Shores v. Swanson, 590 S.W.3d 544, 552 (Tex. 2019).

### G. Submission of Cases to the Jury where jurisdictional issues remain unresolved.

When the issue of immunity remains unresolved because there is a fact question that precludes a determination of jurisdiction prior to trial, the plaintiff needs to make certain that she gets a jury finding on all factual disputes that affect whether the court had jurisdiction. See Creedmoor, 307 S.W.3d at 512-13; City of North Richland Hills, 340 S.W.3d 900, 906 (Tex.App. – Fort Worth 2011, no pet.). The plaintiff’s failure to get jury findings sufficient to establish jurisdiction can result in the case being dismissed by the trial court or a court of appeals for lack of jurisdiction, even after a full jury trial.

Defense counsel must raise the defense of sovereign immunity and make appropriate objections to the charge. The affirmative defense of sovereign immunity from liability and the limits of liability are waived if not timely and properly raised. See also King, 2003 WL 22937252, \*5. However, immunity from suit is jurisdictional and cannot be waived

### H. Jury Charge in an Ordinary Premises Defect Case.

#### 1. Dangerous Condition Premises Defect.

In an ordinary premises liability case in which the licensor/licensee standard of care is applicable and the case is being tried upon a dangerous condition theory of liability, the following fact issues exist:

- (a) Was the condition that is alleged to have caused the injury a dangerous condition?
- (b) Did the governmental entity have actual knowledge of the dangerous condition?
- (c) Was the plaintiff without knowledge of the dangerous condition?
- (d) Did the government fail to warn of the dangerous condition and fail to make the condition reasonably safe?
- (e) Was such failure negligence?
- (f) Was such negligence a proximate cause of the injuries?

See Adams, 888 S.W.2d at 612; Tennison, 509 S.W.2d at 561; Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 237. See also Thompson, 167 S.W.3d at 575 (constructive notice of premises defect does not give rise to duty to warn of premises defect).

Alternatively, the case could be submitted in broad form. In the case of broad form submission, the charge

will ask only if the jury finds the defendant governmental entity was negligent, with accompanying instructions setting forth the defendant’s duty. Specifically, the instruction should state that the governmental defendant was negligent only if:

- (a) The condition complained of posed an unreasonable risk of harm to users of the premises;
- (b) The governmental defendant had actual knowledge of the dangerous condition;
- (c) The plaintiff did not have actual knowledge of the dangerous condition;
- (d) The governmental defendant failed to warn of the dangerous condition; and/or
- (e) The governmental defendant failed to make the dangerous condition reasonably safe.

See *id.*; Texas Pattern Jury Charge, Volume 3, § 66.05.

The Pattern Jury Charge, however, overstates the nature of licensor’s duty in the case of a dangerous condition. Subchapter 66.05 contains an instruction for a licensee case that allows the jury to find the defendant to be negligent if it failed to warn, or make the condition reasonably safe. This would obligate governmental entities to both warn and make the condition safe. A licensor, however, discharges his obligation if he either warns of the condition or makes it safe. Guerra, 858 S.W.2d at 46-47; Smith v. State, 716 S.W.2d at 179. The defendant would have been held liable in both Smith v. State and Guerra had they not been able to discharge their duty to the plaintiffs by warning of the dangerous condition. Guerra, 858 S.W.2d at 46-47; Smith v. State, 716 S.W.2d at 179.

Regardless of the form of submission, adjustments will be made to the charge depending upon the judge’s interpretation of the applicable standard of liability. For example, the charge may be modified in any combination of the ways set forth below:

- (a) Dangerous condition can be defined as a condition that represents an unreasonable risk of injury to persons exercising ordinary care. Payne III, 781 S.W.2d at 321.
- (b) Defendant can be charged with knowledge:
  - (i) only if he knew that the condition represented an unreasonable risk of harm. Hastings, 532 S.W.2d at 149;
  - (ii) if he created the condition. Henson, 843 S.W.2d at 149; or
  - (iii) if from the facts known to defendant he should have discovered the dangerous condition. Cantu, 831 S.W.2d at 425.
- (c) Plaintiff is charged with knowledge if she knew or in the exercise of ordinary care should

have discovered the condition. Weaver, 750 S.W.2d at 26-27.

As with any litigation, the jury verdict will depend in large part upon the attorney’s ability to convince the judge of the state of the law during the charge conference. In particular, defense counsel must be prepared to direct the court to Smith v. State, Guerra, and other decisions that note that, contrary to the Pattern Jury Charge, a governmental occupant’s duty is to warn of the condition or make it reasonably safe, but it is not obligated to do both. Texas Pattern Jury Charge, Volume 3, § 66.05.

## 2. Gross Negligence Case.

In addition to the duty to warn of dangerous conditions in certain circumstances, the occupier also owes to a licensee the duty not to injure him by willful, wanton, or gross negligence. If there is evidence of gross negligence, then a licensor/licensee case may be tried on that basis with appropriate jury questions and instructions. Davenport, 780 S.W.2d at 828-30.

Gross negligence for the purpose of establishing liability of a licensor is defined as:

That entire want of care which would raise the belief that the act or omission complained of was the result of conscious indifference to the rights or welfare of the person or persons to be affected by it, or that shows maliciousness or evil intent by a policy making official of the Defendant.

Cavazos, 811 S.W.2d at 233.

## I. Jury Charge in a Special Defect Case.

In case of a special defect, the fact issues are as follows:

- (a) Did the occupier have actual or constructive knowledge of the [insert defined name of the special defect]?
- (b) Did the [insert defined name of the special defect] pose an unreasonable risk of harm to the claimant?
- (c) Did the occupier fail to exercise reasonable care to warn of the risk?<sup>23</sup>
- (d) Did the failure to use ordinary care to warn of a special defect a proximate cause of the claimant’s injuries?

Payne, 838 S.W.2d at 237; Corbin, 648 S.W.2d at 295; Adams, 888 S.W.2d at 612-13.

Again, the case can be submitted in broad form with the accompanying definition of the governmental entities’ duty in the case of a special defect. The instruction should state that the governmental entity is negligent only if:

- (a) Defendant had actual knowledge or in the exercise of ordinary care should have discovered the [insert the defined name of the special defect];
- (b) The [insert defined name of the special defect] posed an unreasonable risk of harm to the plaintiff;
- (c) Defendant failed to exercise ordinary care to warn of the risk of the [insert the defined name of the special defect]; and
- (d) The failure to use ordinary care to warn of the [insert the defined name of the special defect] was the proximate cause of plaintiff’s injuries.

## J. Jury Submission in a Traffic Signal Case.

In the case of a traffic control device malfunction, the jury questions must inquire as to whether the defendant acted within a reasonable time of having actual knowledge of the malfunction or absence. Specifically, the jury should be asked:

- (a) Did the defendant fail to repair the malfunction within a reasonable time of obtaining actual knowledge that it was malfunctioning?
- (b) Was the defendant’s failure to repair the malfunction within a reasonable time of obtaining actual knowledge of the malfunction negligence?
- (c) Was the defendant’s failure to act within a reasonable time a proximate cause of plaintiff’s injuries?

TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.060(a) (2-3). In the event of broad form submission the applicable definition of negligence must explain that the defendant was negligent only if it failed to act within a reasonable time of learning of the malfunction.

<sup>23</sup> The actual wording of the factual question in Corbin was, “(3) that Safeway did not exercise reasonable care to reduce or to eliminate the risk ....” The modification of the issue is based upon the wording of TCA § 101.022(b) which limits

the government’s liability for premises defects except that the limitation “... does not apply to the duty to warn of special defects....” As discussed herein, this suggests the government’s duty is less than to “reduce or eliminate the risk....” The distinction may be of questionable importance, however, since a warning is the only way to reduce the risk.

## VIII. MISCELLANEOUS

### A. Municipalities’ Liability for Proprietary Activities.

#### 1. Municipalities Remain Liable For Proprietary Functions.

The TCA is applicable to a municipality only in connection with its governmental functions. Vela v. City of McAllen, 894 S.W.2d 836 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 1995, no writ). The TCA does not displace municipal liability in the case of proprietary functions. Likes, 962 S.W.2d at 501; Adams, 888 S.W.2d at 611-12. Thus, in the event that the City’s activity constitutes a proprietary function, it has the same liability as existed at common law. *Id.* Therefore, with proprietary functions, the City’s standard of care is established by common law, and there is no cap on total liability. *Id.*

The state’s sovereign immunity extends to municipalities to the extent their actions serve the interests of the general public, rather than just the interests of their citizens. City of Tyler v. Likes, 962 S.W.2d 489, 501 (Tex. 1997); TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE ANN. § 101.0215(a). When a city performs functions that are assigned to it by the state or which serve the interests of all citizens, then it is performing a governmental function and enjoys full sovereign immunity, except to the extent it has been waived. Likes, 962 S.W.2d at 501. Accordingly, providing police and fire protection promotes the health, safety and general welfare of all citizens of the state and are, thus, governmental functions. City of LaPorte, 898 S.W.2d at 291 (Tex.1995). Conversely, a city acts in its proprietary capacity when, in the exercise of its discretion, it takes actions primarily for the benefit of those within its corporate limits. Truong v. City of Houston, 99 S.W.3d 204, 209 (Tex.App.—Houston [1<sup>st</sup> Dist.] 2002, no pet.).

The Courts have struggled with creating a clear test of what constitutes a proprietary versus a governmental activity. The Texas Supreme Court has long identified the “benefits test”, whether the acts or contract benefit the citizens of the municipality or the state as a whole, in deciding whether the City is acting in a governmental or proprietary capacity. Wasson Interests, Ltd. v. City of Jacksonville, 559 S.W.3d 142, 151 (Tex. 2018)(Wasson II). While it reiterated the “benefits test” in Wasson II, the court considered four factors in determining if the benefit was local or state wide. *Id.* “[W]e consider whether (1) the City’s act[ion]...was mandatory or discretionary, (2) [whether the actions] were intended to benefit the general public or the City’s residents, (3) the City was acting on the State’s behalf or its own behalf when it [acted], and (4) the City’s act ... was sufficiently related to a governmental function to render the act governmental even if it would otherwise have been proprietary.” *Id.* at 150.

Drawing the line between where proprietary functions begin and proprietary functions end can create liability for a city that is completely unexpected. For example, while providing police protection is a governmental function, providing insurance benefits to policemen is a governmental function. Temple v. City of Houston, 189 S.W.3d 816, 818-21 (Tex.App.—Houston [1<sup>st</sup> Dist.] 2006, no pet.). Thus, the City of Houston was performing a proprietary function and had no immunity related to its providing insurance benefits to members of its police department. *Id.* See City of Merkel v. Copeland, 561 S.W.3d 720 (Tex. App.—Eastland 2018)(city was immune from suit because the disposal of effluent (treated waste water) by sale to third-parties constituted a governmental function). But see Tri-Stem, Ltd. v. City of Hous., 566 S.W.3d 789 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2018)(pet. filed) (city acting in a proprietary function when it entered an auditing and billing collection contract and, therefore, the plaintiff’s suit against the City was not barred by sovereign immunity).

In Wasson II, the Texas Supreme Court held that the lease of lake front property by the City of Jacksonville was a proprietary act. Wasson II, 559 S.W.3d at 153. In reaching its holding, the Court took particular note of the fact that: (1) “the record indicates the City’s primary objective was to develop the lake [as a water source for the City] and that leasing the properties raised funds for the City’s budget;” and (2) “the City’s decision to lease the property was entirely discretionary and primary benefitted the City’s residents supports this conclusion...”. *Id.* at 151-152 The Court then rejected the argument that the City’s argument that securing a water supply must be a governmental function, noting, “The fact that a city’s proprietary action ‘touches upon’ a governmental function is insufficient to render the proprietary action governmental.” *Id.* at 153. Accordingly the Court held that the City’s development and leasing of lake property was a propriety function. *Id.* But see Triple BB, LLC v. Vill. of Briarcliff, 566 S.W.3d 385 (Tex. App.—Austin 2018)(upgrading a water treatment plant constituted one of the enumerated governmental functions in the TCA and, thus, there was no waiver of the City’s immunity).

Similarly in City of Westworth Vill. v. City of White Settlement, 558 S.W.3d 232 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth 2018), the Court of Appeals held that “If a municipality contracts in its proprietary capacity but later breaches that contract for governmental reasons, immunity does not apply.” *Id.* at 241. “Conversely, if a municipality contracts in its governmental capacity but breaches that contract for proprietary reasons, immunity does apply.” *Id.* The court analyzed the body of the contract itself, which recited that its purpose was “to promote local economic development and to stimulate



business and commercial activity” in Westworth Village and White Settlement through Westworth Village’s sales-tax-funded economic development grant. The court held that nothing in the agreement indicated that these municipalities entered into the contract to benefit the general public or the State of Texas. *Id.* at 245.

Section 101.0215 of the TCA provides an incomplete list of functions that are and are not governmental municipal activities that are proprietary or governmental. TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE ANN. § 101.0215. However, when an activity falls outside these parameters, then the courts must determine whether the city is acting as an agency of the state for the benefit of all citizens, or is acting principally for the benefits of its own citizens in determining whether the city enjoys immunity. Additionally, the construction of a pool to include modern features designed to enhance the user’s experience and distinguish the Natatorium from a generic pool, did not constitute “the introduction of a proprietary element into an activity designated by the Legislature as governmental does not serve to alter its classification.” Henry v. City of Angleton, No. 01–13–00976–CV, 2014 WL 5465704 at \*2–3 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th] Oct. 28, 2014, no pet.) (quoting City of Texarkana v. City of New Boston, 141 S.W.3d 778, 784 n.3 (Tex.App.—Texarkana 2004, pet. denied), *abrogated on other grounds* by Tooke v. City of Mexia, 197 S.W.3d 325, 338–42, n. 60 (Tex. 2006)); see City of Plano v. Homoky, 294 S.W.3d 809, 815 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2009, no pet.) (quoting City of San Antonio v. Butler, 131 S.W.3d 170, 178 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 2004, pet. denied) (“In considering whether the City was engaged in a governmental or proprietary function, a plaintiff may not ‘split various aspects of [a City’s] operation into discrete functions and recharacterize certain of those functions as proprietary.’”). Furthermore, a city charging an admission fee to access or use a facility does not convert the operation of the facility from a governmental function to a proprietary function. Henry, No. 01–13–00976–CV, 2014 WL 5465704, pat p. 3.

a. Counties, School Districts, And State Have No Proprietary Functions.

The distinction between proprietary and governmental functions developed from, and is associated only with, municipal law. It is not applicable to the state or to counties. Neither the state, counties, nor school districts have proprietary functions. Wasson, 489 S.W.3d at No. 3; Turvey, 602 S.W.2d at 519; Nueces Co., 246 S.W.3d at 652; Adams v. Harris County, 530 S.W.2d 606 (Tex.App.—Houston [14<sup>th</sup> Dist.] 1975); Atchison, Topeka, 783 S.W.2d at 646 (construction and maintenance of state highways is a governmental function). Jezek, 605 S.W.2d at 547 (counties in Texas have no proprietary functions); Daniels v. Univ. of Tex. Health Sci. Ctr., 2004 WL

2613282 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 2004, no pet.) (mem. op.).

2. Roadway Maintenance, However, Is Now a Governmental, Not a Proprietary, Function.

As part of the “Tort Reform” initiative in 1987, the status of street maintenance was changed; it is now a governmental function. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.0215(4). This means that premises liability cases involving city street maintenance now come under the TCA with its limitations and exceptions on liability. City of Galveston v. Albright, 2004 WL 2439231 (Tex.App.—Houston 2004, no pet. h.) (claim that city had duty to maintain drainage block in safe manner); Bell v. City of Dallas, 146 S.W.3d 819, 824 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2004, no pet.) (municipality activities regarding sanitary and storm sewers are governmental functions); Winkenhower, 875 S.W.2d at 390–91.

One needs to read municipal premises liability cases decided prior to “tort reform” with the understanding that the law has changed. For example, Jezek noted that the maintenance of streets in a safe condition was a proprietary function, and a city was liable for its negligence in the performance on this function.

3. Pre-1970 Design, Construction and Maintenance of Municipal Public Works May be Deemed Proprietary.

Prior to the TCA, the construction of municipal public works was considered a proprietary function. There was also some authority for the proposition that the design of public works by a city were also proprietary functions. See Hamilton, 714 S.W.2d at 374–75 (holding city liable for design of low water crossing). But see Likes, 962 S.W.2d at 501 (citing earlier Texas Supreme Court decisions holding that when a city exercises its discretion regarding public works it enjoys governmental immunity).

The effective date of the TCA is January 1, 1970 and from that time forward suits against cities for the performance of governmental functions were controlled by the TCA. However, it was not until the 1987 amendments to the TCA that the Act provided that the “street construction and design, bridge construction and maintenance and street maintenance, sanitary and storm sewers, warning signals, engineering functions, maintenance of traffic signals, signs and hazards” were governmental functions. Adams, 888 S.W.2d at 611. The timing of the enactment of the TCA and whether design of public works are proprietary functions has created a morass in which cities may be found to be held liable for the design, construction and maintenance of public works based on these activities’ being proprietary functions not covered by the TCA. See Likes, 962 S.W.2d at 501; Adams, 888 S.W.2d at 611.

The first case to address this problem was the Adams decision from the Fort Worth Court of Appeals. Adams complained that the design of a roadway underpass (the City’s failure to provide adequate drainage and failure to provide a gauge showing the depth of flood waters) and the failure to erect barricades caused the death of a mother and her son. Adams, 888 S.W.2d at 610. The Fort Worth court pointed out that until the 1987 amendments to the TCA the design of public structures were proprietary functions. The court went on to point out that for all suits filed after September 1987, the amended version of the TCA, (that makes design, construction and maintenance governmental functions) controlled. *Id.* However, the court noted that the TCA has no application for acts or omissions occurring before January 1970. *Id.* For suits complaining of acts and omissions before the TCA’s effective date, a city’s liability was determined by common law. *Id.* Moreover, it was common law that would determine whether the acts or omissions at issue were proprietary or governmental functions of a city. *See id.* at 614.

Based on this reasoning, the Fort Worth court went on to hold that the plaintiff’s causes of action based on failure to provide adequate drainage and a flood gauge related back to the date of construction of the underpass. *Id.* Since the underpass was constructed before 1970, the TCA did not apply to those claims. The court held that these causes of action could be tried under common law. Interestingly, the court did not address whether the claims related to the design of the underpass would constitute proprietary or governmental functions for the City. The court’s acknowledgment that claims against cities for performance of governmental functions and the fact that the case was remanded for new trial offered some suggestion that the court concluded or at least would not rule out a finding that the design of the underpass was a proprietary function. *See id.*

The Fort Worth court did note plaintiff’s complaints regarding the failure to erect barricades and failure to warn of the flood water on the road were acts or omissions that occurred on the date of the accident. *Id.* As such, the court held that these claims would have to be remanded for a new trial under the amended version of the Act. *Id.*

The supreme court took up this issue in the Likes case. Likes complained that the construction operation and maintenance of storm sewers caused flood waters to damage their home. Likes, 962 S.W.2d at 492-93. The culverts in question were built in 1925 and 1938 and modifications were made to the culverts after the construction was complete. *Id.* at 500.

The supreme court held that both the initial design of the culverts and the decision of whether or not to improve the culverts after construction were governmental functions immune from liability. *Id.*

With respect to the initial design of the culverts the court held:

Governmental immunity protects a city when it exercises discretionary powers of a public nature involving judicial or legislative functions. The City’s design and planning of its culvert system are quasi-judicial functions subject to governmental immunity.

*Id.* at 501. Turning to the issue of liability based on the failure to improve the culverts after construction, the supreme court notes that part of the transcript includes deposition testimony from the plaintiff’s expert criticizing the design of the culverts and the City’s failure to make improvements to the culverts. *Id.* at 501. In apparent response to this evidence, the court states:

Because a municipality’s decision about whether to order public improvements is discretionary, its decision to initiate or not initiate such an undertaking is an exercise of governmental power for which it may not be held liable.

*Id.* This passage clearly indicates that a city cannot be held liable for failing to improve or upgrade an existing public work is a governmental function for which it cannot be held liable.

The court, following the Adams’ rationale, held that the City could be liable for the construction and maintenance of the culverts because these acts occurred before the effective date of the TCA and under common law they were proprietary functions.

However, the acts of constructing and maintaining a storm sewer are proprietary at common law, both because they are performed in a city’s private capacity for the benefit of those within its corporate limits and because they are ministerial functions. The City could be liable for the negligent performance of these acts if they proximately caused Likes’ damages.

*Id.* (citations omitted).

## **B. Do Contractors Working For Governmental Entities Enjoy Sovereign Immunity?**

A general contractor who is in control of premises is charged with the same duty as an owner or occupier. Barham v. Turner Const. Co., 803 S.W.2d 731 (Tex.App.—Dallas 1990, writ denied). The limitation of liability for premises defects provided for in the TCA has been held to apply to a general contractor in control of government premises. Marshbank v. Austin Bridge

Co., 669 S.W.2d 129, 134 (Tex. App.—Corpus Christi 1984, writ ref’d n.r.e.).

[A]n independent contractor, who acts in creating a condition upon land on behalf of the possessor, is subject to the same liability and enjoys the same freedom from liability for physical harm caused thereby to others upon the land as though he were the possessor of the land. Any duty owed by ... [the contractor] to appellant based upon a premises liability theory would be limited to the duty owed by [the government].

*Id.* at 134. But see K.D.F. v. Rex, 878 S.W.2d 589, 597 (Tex. 1994) (a contractor enjoys governmental immunity to the extent he acts solely at the direction of the entity; however, a contractor who exercises discretion and is not subject to the direction and control of the entity is not entitled to sovereign immunity). Moreover, the mere fact that a company is doing work pursuant to a contract or at the request with a governmental entity does not vest it with sovereign immunity. See Critical Care Medicine Inc., v. Sheppard, No. 04-05-00676-CV, 2005 WL 3533130 (Tex.App.—San Antonio, DecemberDec. 28, 2005, no pet.)(mem. op.).

In 2003, the Legislature codified the holding in the Marshbank case for companies who contract with the Texas Department of Transportation. For accidents occurring after September 1, 2003, a company that is building or repairing roads for the Texas Department of Transportation cannot be held liable for injury death, or property damage arising from its construction work if it is in compliance with the contract documents. TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 97.002.

However, a private contractor carrying out governmental functions, such as design and construction of roadways, is not entitled to sovereign immunity where the governmental entity delegated the entity’s responsibilities to the contractor. Brown & Gay Engineering, Inc. v. Olivares, 461 S.W.3d 117 (Tex. 2015). The contractor’s assumption of responsibility made it liable to plaintiff and precluded it have enjoying any form of sovereign or governmental immunity. *Id.* The Supreme Court recently reaffirmed Brown & Gay Engineering’s holding in Fort Worth Transp. Auth. v. Rodriguez, No. 16-0542, 2018 Tex. LEXIS 370, at \*22-26 (Apr. 27, 2018), where it also concluded that while the independent contractor was liable for performing an essential government function, it also enjoyed the benefit of the cap on damages under the TCA.

On the other hand, a governmental premises owner may find itself liable for a contractor’s negligence if the government exercises more control than just a general right to start, stop, and inspect the work. Cf.

Hoechst-Celanese Corp. v. Mendez, 967 S.W.2d 354, 355 (Tex. 1998) (“[a]n employer’s duty of reasonable care is commensurate with the control it retains over the independent contractor”). In the case of a private person occupier, liability arises from the law of agency as set forth in Restatement (Second) of Torts, § 414 (1977). Redinger v. Living, Inc., 689 S.W.2d 415 (Tex. 1985). However, it may be that a governmental entity would not be liable under this theory unless such negligence involves “some condition or some use of tangible property ....” *Id.*

At the same time, if the danger causing the injury resulted from the performance of work the contractor was employed to do, rather than from any condition of the premises where the work was done; there is no liability on the part of the owner. Moore v. Tex. Co., 299 S.W.2d 401 (Tex. Civ. App.—El Paso 1956, pet. ref’d n.r.e.).

### C. Chapter 75 of the Texas Civil Practice and Remedies Code, Regarding Landowners Who Permit Use of Property for Recreational Use and its Application to Governmental Entities.

Section 75.002 provides limited liability to landowners who permit others to use their property for recreational purposes. Under section 75.002, when the premises occupant gives permission to enter for recreational purposes, the person to whom permission is given has the status of a trespasser on the premises. See Crossland, 781 S.W.2d at 437. A premises occupant owes a lesser duty to a trespasser than to a licensee. Consequently, in the case of injuries that took place at a park, zoo, or other recreational facility, governmental defendants argued that they were obligated only to refrain from injuring the plaintiff willfully, wantonly, or through gross negligence. See Tex. Dep’t of Parks & Wildlife v. Miranda, 133 S.W.3d 217 (Tex. 2004); City of Dallas v. Mitchell, 870 S.W.2d 21 (Tex. 1994).

For a period of time there was a split among the courts of appeals regarding the application of section 75.002 of the Texas Civil Practice and Remedies Code to governmental recreational facilities. Compare Mitchell, 855 S.W.2d at 741.

The supreme court appeared to have resolved the issue in City of Dallas v. Mitchell, 870 S.W.2d at 21 when it held: “Section 75.002 does not apply to governmental entities because the standard of care owed to recreational users on governmental property is specified in Section 101.022 of the Texas Tort Claims Act.” *Id.* at 22.

In 1995, the Texas Legislature amended both Chapter 75 of the Civil Practice and Remedies Code as well as the TCA to overrule Mitchell and make 75.002 applicable to governmental entities. See Act of May 26, 1995, 74<sup>th</sup> Leg., R.S. Ch. 520, 1995 Tex. Gen. Laws 3276, 3276-77 (amending TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM.

CODE ANN. §§ 75.003, 101.058 (Vernon 1997)). Section 75.003(c) of the Texas Civil Practice and Remedies Code was amended to provide:

Except for a governmental unit, this chapter applies only to an owner, lessee, or occupant of real property who:

- (1) does not charge for entry to the premises;
  - (2) charges for entry to the premises, but whose total charges collected in the previous calendar year for all recreational use of the entire premises of the owner, lessee, or occupant are not more than twice the total amount of ad valorem taxes imposed on the premises for the previous calendar year; or
  - (3) has liability insurance coverage in effect on an act or omission described by Section 75.004(a) and in the amounts equal to or greater than those provided by that section.
- (e) Except as otherwise provided, this chapter applies to a governmental unit.
  - (f) This chapter does not waive sovereign immunity.
  - (g) To the extent that this chapter limits the liability of a governmental unit under circumstances in which the governmental unit would be liable under Chapter 101, this chapter controls.

TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE ANN. § 75.003 (Vernon 1997).

Section 101.058 of the TCA was amended to state:

**LANDOWNER’S LIABILITY.** To the extent that Chapter 75 limits the liability of a governmental unit under circumstances in which the governmental unit would be liable under this chapter, Chapter 75 controls.

TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.058 (West 2005).

While the Legislature’s intentions may have been clear, the amendments did not make it clear how the statutes were intended to interact. The First Court of Appeals seems to have resolved the uncertainty in City of Houston v. Morua, 982 S.W.2d 126, 129 (Tex.App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1998, no pet.). In Morua, parents brought suit on behalf of their child who was bitten by a wolf at the Houston zoo. Clearly the zoo was a recreational facility within the meaning of Chapter 75 of the Civil Practice and Remedies Code. The City argued that:

[The amendments were] an attempt by the legislature to alter the result in Mitchell and ensure that the recreational use statute did apply to governmental entities. The City further argues that, because the recreational use statute controls in such situation, section 75.003(f) bars any liability for the City in light of that section’s express language that, “This chapter does not waive sovereign immunity.”

The First Court of Appeals rejected this analysis, ruling that the plain language of the statutes made it clear that governmental entities could be held liable under Chapter 75.

The express wording of both section 101.058 of the Act and section 75.003(g) of the recreational use statute undermine the City’s argument. Both sections clearly state that, to the extent the recreational use statute *limits* the liability of a governmental unit under circumstances in which the governmental unit *would be liable* under the Act, the recreational use statute, and its diminished standard of care, controls. A plain reading of both sections reveals that, once it is determined that a governmental entity is liable under the Act, the recreational use statute may then operate to limit, not abolish, that liability if the facts of a particular case support its application. ... [B]ased on the plain meaning of sections 75.003(g) and 101.058 outlined above, an analysis of a governmental unit landowner’s liability does not reach the recreational use statute *unless* it is first determined that the litigant’s claims fall under the waiver of immunity created by the Act. Therefore, section 75.003(f) merely emphasizes that the recreational use statute *limits preexisting* liability, and does not, in and of itself, waive sovereign immunity or abolish the waiver of liability found in the Act.

Morua, 982 S.W.2d at 129 (citations omitted, emphasis in original).

Thus, when the premises are a recreational facility within Chapter 75 of the Texas Civil Practice and Remedies Code, the duty owed is reduced from a licensor/licensee standard to the trespasser standard. *Id.*; City of Fort Worth v. Crockett, 142 S.W.3d 550, 552 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth 2004, pet. denied); West v. City of Crandall, 139 S.W.3d 784, 787 (Tex.App.—Dallas 2004, no pet.). As explained by the Texas Supreme Court:

When property is open to the public for “recreation,” however, the recreational use

statute further limits the governmental unit’s duty by classifying recreational users as trespassers and limiting liability for premises defects to claims involving gross negligence, malicious intent, or bad faith. ... In doing so, the statute elevates the burden of proof necessary to invoke the Tort Claims Act’s statutory waiver. ... TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE 75.003(d)-(g) (the recreational use statute neither creates liability nor waives sovereign immunity, but “limits the liability of a governmental unit under circumstances in which the governmental unit would be liable under [the Tort Claims Act]”); 101.058 (the recreational use statute controls to the extent it limits a governmental unit’s liability under the Tort Claims Act).

Suarez v. City of Texas City, 465 S.W.3d 623, 632 (Tex. 2015).

The Supreme Court has determined that the scope of Chapter 75’s application extends to all activities and facilities of a recreational nature. City of Bellmead v. Torres, 89 S.W.3d 611, 614-15 (Tex. 2002). Ms. Torres was injured when a swing she sat on at a park broke. *Id.* at 611. In 1996, at the time of Ms. Torres’ injury, Chapter 75 contained an itemized list of activities that were covered by the chapter’s limitations of liability. *Id.* at 613. In 1996, Chapter 75 did not include playgrounds and swing sets as being an enumerated recreational activity. *Id.* The Legislature subsequently amended Chapter 75 to include “any other activity associated with enjoying nature or the outdoors.” *Id.* Thus, the issue before the court was whether Ms. Torres’ claims should be evaluated under Chapter 75 of the Civil Practice and Remedies Code or under the Tort Claims Act. *Id.* The court held that swinging on a swing was the type of activity that the Legislature intended to be covered by the limitation of liability established by Chapter 75. *Id.* at 615. The court affirmed the trial court’s granting of summary judgment because Torres did not plead that her injuries were as a result of the city’s willful, wonton or gross and negligent conduct, the standard of liability under Chapter 75. *Id.*; see Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 225 ([t]he recreational use statute limits the Department’s duty for premises defects to that which is owed a trespasser).

In Univ. of Tex. at Arlington v. Williams, the Supreme Court had to determine whether participating and watching sporting events fell within the statute. Univ. of Tex. at Arlington v. Williams, 459 S.W.3d 48, Tex. 2015). The Court began by reviewing how the Legislature has changed the activities covered by the RUS over the last 50 years:

When first enacted in 1965, the Legislature limited the statute to hunting, fishing, or

camping on private property.<sup>1</sup> Over the last fifty years, the Legislature has added to the recreational-activities list, but as a class these activities have generally remained consistent. For example, the list was enlarged in 1981 to include “activities such as hunting, fishing, swimming, boating, camping, picnicking, hiking, pleasure driving, nature study, water skiing and water sports.” An accompanying bill analysis explained that the statute’s “original purpose” had been “to keep private land open for hunting, fishing, and camping” but that “many other recreational activities [had] gained popularity” since the law’s original enactment, “such as water skiing and cross-country hiking, which require wide open spaces or lakes and streams that may not be available in public parks or preserves near urban centers.”<sup>3</sup> The analysis concluded that expanding the list of activities “would encourage owners to open more land for such uses.”<sup>4</sup> . . .

What UTA refers to as the “catchall” provision was added in 1997.<sup>7</sup> The recreational-activities list was amended that year to include “bird watching and any other activity associated with enjoying nature or the outdoors.” Bird-watching was added to subpart (I)’s nature-study provision, while the “catchall” was added at the list’s end as subpart (L). See TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODEE § 75.001(3)(I), (L). See TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODEE § 75.001(3)(I), (L).

*Id.* at \*4-5.

The Court went on to note that while playing sports is associated with outdoor activities that does not mean it is covered by the RUS:

While [playing and watching sports] are more likely than not to occur outside, their association with the enjoyment of nature or the outdoors is different. .... Because of its association with nature, “enjoying the outdoors” cannot include every enjoyable outside activity . . . . It must also be associated with nature, or “that part of the physical world that is removed from human habitation.” In this sense, the “outdoors” is not integral to the enjoyment of competitive sports because the focus of that activity is the competition itself, not where the competition takes place. In contrast, a park playground is not so much a celebration of organized human activity as it is a respite from it—a place where children can run, play, and otherwise enjoy the

outdoors. The enjoyment of nature or the outdoors is thus a significant part of playground activity, but is not integral to the enjoyment of competitive sports. Although soccer may be played in an open-air stadium, a soccer game, as ordinarily understood, is not associated with nature in the sense indicated by the statutory definition of “recreation.” Because the outdoors and nature are not integral to the enjoyment of [playing and watching sports] and because the activity is unlike the others the statute uses to define “recreation,” we conclude that subpart (L)’s so-called “catch-all” does not catch this activity. See TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 75.001(3) (listing the activities that define recreation under the statute).

*Id.* Thus, playing and watching sports, as well as acts of ingress and egress to do the same, do not fall within the activities covered by the RUS. *Id.*; Lawson v. City of Diboll, 472 S.W.3d 667 (Tex. 2015) (injuries sustained while leaving a park where the decedent had watched a youth sports event, was not covered by the RUS).

However, this line may be further blurred when it comes to methods of transportation that can be considered recreational. Bicycling is a defined form of recreation under the RUS, and accordingly the Texas Supreme Court has held that bicycling in a university-owned apartment complex was recreational use. Univ. of Tex. at Austin v. Garner, 595 S.W.3d 645, 650 (Tex. 2019). Since “pleasure driving, including off-road motorcycling and off-road automobile driving” is also defined as recreational use, this decision opens the door to other RUS defenses involving methods of transportation. See TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE § 75.001(3)(H). In order to avoid the RUS, a plaintiff may need to affirmatively assert that they were not driving for pleasure, but rather some other purpose, when crossing state-owned property.

The Texas Supreme Court has repeatedly held that Chapter 75 pre-empts section 101.058 of the TCA. See Suarez v. City of Texas City, 465 S.W.3d at 632. A plaintiff cannot avoid the heightened liability standard established by the Recreational use statute by alleging liability under the TCA for the condition or use of property. Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 233. See State of Tex. Parks & Wildlife Dep’t v. Morris, 129 S.W.3d 804, 809-10 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi 2004, no pet.) (“[t]he Tort Claims Act ... does not allow plaintiffs to circumvent the heightened standards of a premises defect claim contained in section 101.022 by recasting the same acts as a claim relating to the negligent condition or use of tangible property.”). Therefore, merely alleging injuries were caused by the use of personal property or nuisance/attractive nuisance does not allow a party to get around the standard of care set

forth in the recreational use statute. State v. Shumake, 131 S.W.3d 66, 81 (Tex.App.—Austin, 2003, pet. filed), *aff’d* 199 S.W.3d 279 (Tex. 2006). See Simpson, 500 S.W.3d at 389-90 (cannot circumvent limitations for premises liability under TCA by claims the injury was caused by personal property).

In order to prevail, the plaintiff must establish: (1) the defendant had a duty to warn or protect against the condition that caused the injury; and (2) the failure to warn constituted gross negligence, malicious intent or bad faith. Suarez, 465 S.W.3d at 632.

In order to establish a duty to warn, the plaintiff must establish that the condition was unknown to the user of the premises and was not a condition “inherent” to the nature of the recreational activity. *Id.* at 633. As explained by the Supreme Court:

We have been called upon on several occasions to examine when circumstances existing in a recreational setting give rise to a duty to warn or protect. We have found such a duty when an artificial condition created a risk of harm that was latent and not so inherent in the recreational use that it could reasonably be anticipated. See Shumake, 199 S.W.3d at 281–82, 288 (recognizing a duty to warn or protect when a man-made structure—an underground culvert—interacted with the natural perils associated with river tubing to create a powerful undertow that sucked a nine-year-old girl under water and trapped her in the culvert). On the other hand, we have declined to impose a duty for premises conditions that are open and obvious, regardless of whether such conditions are artificial or naturally occurring. See Kirwan, 298 S.W.3d at 623, 626 (concluding that landowner had no duty to warn about risk of falling associated with sitting on cliff’s edge even though the particular risk—the collapse of the cliff—was unexpected); Flynn, 228 S.W.3d at 655, 659–60 (finding no duty to warn or protect cyclist from visible oscillating sprinkler that knocked the plaintiff off her bike as she rode along a public trail). For naturally occurring conditions, our jurisprudence suggests that obvious conditions include dangers that are not necessarily visible but are inherent in the recreational use. ... Although we have not directly addressed whether a duty arises with respect to conditions that are naturally occurring but concealed and unexpected, we have said we could “envision” such a duty where a landowner knows of a hidden and dangerous natural condition that is located in an area frequented by recreational users,

where the landowner is aware of deaths or injuries related to that particular condition, and where the danger is such that a reasonable recreational user would not expect to encounter it on the property.

Suarez, 465 S.W.3d at 633 (some internal citations and quotations omitted); but see City of El Paso v. Collins, 483 S.W.3d 742 (Tex. App.—El Paso 2016, no pet.) (some evidence of lack of knowledge required to shift burden to plaintiff, such as an affidavit “averring that the entity itself had not been aware of any dangerous condition on the premises” prior to the injury).

In State of Tex. v. Shumake, 199 S.W.3d 279 (Tex. 2006), the Texas Supreme Court rejected the State’s argument that liability under the Recreation Use statute was limited to injuries resulting from negligent activities being conducted on the property. The case arose from the death of nine-year old Kayla Shumake at the Blanco State Park, which is owned and operated by the State Parks and Wildlife Department. Kayla and her parents were at the park when she drowned while swimming in the Blanco River. The Shumakes alleged that Kayla’s drowning was caused by a strong undertow created by a man-made culvert that diverted water under a nearby park road. *Id.* The Shumakes offered evidence that only days before Kayla’s death, three other park patrons reported to Parks and Wildlife’s Austin office that they almost drowned as a result of the undertow adjacent to the culvert. *Id.*

The State argued that liability under Chapter 75 of the Civil Practice and Remedies Code was limited to injuries caused in connection with negligent activities being conducted on the premises. *Id.* In order to prevail on negligent activity claim, a plaintiff must establish that she was injured as a result of a contemporaneous activity being held on the property and not by a premises defect. *Id.* The State contended that under Chapter 75 land owners had no duty to warn of premises defects but only of potential danger from activities being held on the premises. *Id.*

The Supreme Court rejected the State’s argument and held that, under the plain language of Chapter 75, land owners had the duty to warn of certain premises defects. As noted above, the Court noted that it was not requiring land owners to warn of “the inherent dangers of nature.”

A landowner has no duty to warn or protect trespassers from obvious defects or conditions. Thus, the owner may assume that the recreational user needs no warning to appreciate the dangers of natural conditions, such as a sheer cliff, a rushing river, or even a concealed rattlesnake. But a landowner can be liable for gross negligence in creating a condition that a recreational user would not

reasonably expect to encounter on the property in the course of the permitted use.

*Id.* (citations omitted). The court also pointed out that the standard for liability was whether the governmental land owner had committed “an act or omission involving subjective awareness of an extreme degree of risk, indicating conscious indifference to the rights, safety, or welfare of others.” *Id.*

In order to establish liability under the Recreational Use Statute, the plaintiff must prove gross negligence or intent to injure. Stephen F. Austin Univ. v. Flynn, 228 S.W.3d 653 (Tex. 2007). Flynn failed to show the sprinklers represented an extreme risk, or that the university was consciously indifferent to the risk of the sprinklers causing serious injury. *Id.* The Recreational Use Statute does not require the land owner to make the premises safe for recreational purposes or to warn users of the property of defects that are open or obvious. *Id.*; Morris v. Tex. Parks & Wildlife Dep’t, 226 S.W.3d 720 (Tex.App—Corpus Christi 2007, no pet.) (there was no duty to warn of possibility of hot ash or coals in campfire ring). Flynn could not establish jurisdiction where she and her husband both saw the sprinklers before they rode through them. Stephen F. Austin Univ. v. Flynn, 228 S.W.3d 653 (Tex. 2007). Mere general allegations of gross negligence related to running sprinklers at times of high traffic on the trail were insufficient to establish jurisdiction under the Recreational Use Statute. *Id.*

The Texas Supreme Court also distinguishes between the duties owed by a governmental entity, depending on the condition that caused the plaintiff’s injury. See City of Waco v. Kirwan, 298 S.W.3d 618 (Tex. 2009). Kirwan arose from a death in a city park caused by the collapse of rocks on a cliff on which the decedent was sitting. *Id.* at 620. The city had put up a wall back from the cliff, and the wall included the warning that visitors should not go past the wall for their safety. *Id.* The decedent went past the wall and the warning to sit on the cliff. *Id.* The Supreme Court held that: “We must ... apply the statute to his case in a manner that furthers that policy [of encouraging governmental and private entities to open up their land for public use]. Thus, we hold that a landowner ... under the recreational use statute, does not generally owe a duty to others to protect or warn against the dangers of natural conditions on the land, and therefore may not ordinarily be held to have been grossly negligent for failing to have done so.” *Id.* at 626.

Proving Gross negligence under the RUS, involves two components: (1) viewed objectively from the actor’s standpoint, the act or omission must involve an extreme degree of risk, considering the probability and magnitude of the potential harm to others; and (2) the actor must have actual, subjective awareness of the risk involved, but nevertheless proceeds in conscious

indifference to the rights, safety, or welfare of others. Suarez, 465 S.W.3d at 634; Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 225; Henry v. City of Angleton, No. 01–13–00976–CV, 2014 WL 5465704 \*6 (Tex. App.-Houston [14th Dist.] Oct. 28, 2014, no pet.). When reviewing the second subjective component, “what separates ordinary negligence from gross negligence is the defendant’s state of mind; in other words, the plaintiff must show that the defendant knew about the peril, but his acts or omissions demonstrate that he did not care.” Louis.-Pac. Corp. v. Andrade, 19 S.W.3d 245, 246-47 (Tex. 1999); see also City of Corsicana v. Stewart, 249 S.W.3d 412, 414–15 (Tex. 2008) (holding that “actual knowledge” element of a premises defect cause of action requires knowledge that the dangerous condition existed at the time of the accident). Additionally, the governmental entity must have the requisite knowledge “at the time of the accident.” Suarez, 465 S.W.3d at 634.

Because knowledge of the dangerous condition’s existence is an element of gross negligence claims, a plaintiff must plead and prove that the defendant landowner had subjective awareness of the serious risk and disregarded it at the time of the accident. *Id.*; Miranda, 133 S.W.3d at 225. In Henry, the plaintiff alleged that the City’s failure to install elevated lifeguard stations or chairs amounted to “ignoring a known extreme risk of harm or death,” but failed to allege any facts establishing that the City had actual knowledge or was aware of any risk. Henry, 2014 WL 5465704 \*6. Henry alleged only that the City’s failure to install different lifeguard stations or chairs amounted to “ignoring a known extreme risk,” without first alleging any facts that the City knew of the alleged risk. *Id.* Therefore, the court of appeals held Henry failed to allege facts demonstrating that the City knew of the allegedly dangerous placement or design of the lifeguard stations or chairs before Kylie’s injury, or that the City was aware of any extreme risk. *Id.* Consequently, Henry failed to allege facts demonstrating gross negligence with respect to her claims that were based on the lifeguard stations or chairs, which was the only premises defect Henry alleged. See Flynn, 228 S.W.3d at 659–60 (“conclusory” allegation that appellee “knew that the use of the sprinkler .... posed a risk of serious injury to others” but that appellee was “grossly negligent in ignoring and creating that risk” was insufficient “to meet the standard imposed by the recreational statute”); City of El Paso v. Collins, 440 S.W.3d 879, 885 (Tex.App.—El Paso 2013, no pet.) (immunity not waived where plaintiffs alleged that City had knowledge of pool’s defective condition because they did not allege that City was “aware of the extreme risk” to children); Univ. of Tex. Health Sci. Ctr. at Hous. v. Garcia, 346 S.W.3d 220, 228 (Tex.App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 2011, no pet.) (allegation that university “knew that, left unattended, the condition of the volleyball court would

likely deteriorate and expose players to an unreasonable risk of injury” insufficient to “affirmatively demonstrate the trial court’s jurisdiction”); Homoky, 294 S.W.3d at 817–18 (appellant’s allegations, including that landowner “knew or should have known about the dangerous condition .... [that] created an unreasonable risk of harm,” failed to satisfy pleading requirements for gross negligence); Biermeret v. Univ. of Tex. Sys., No. 02–06–240–CV, 2007 WL 2285482, at \*6 (Tex.App.—Fort Worth Aug. 9, 2007, pet. denied) (“[B]ecause no pleadings or jurisdictional evidence exists that [appellee] possessed actual or constructive knowledge .... that on the date in question [the floor] actually had become wet and slick prior to [appellant’s] fall, [appellant] has not shown that if [appellee] were a private person it would be liable to him.”).

Moreover, proof of the governmental entity’s subjective knowledge must establish more than knowledge or risks inherent in the activity. Suarez, 465 S.W.3d at 634. Suarez arose from the drowning of a father and two daughters in the Galveston ship channel just off a dyke owned and operated as a recreations facility by Texas City. The Supreme Court noted that the plaintiffs attempted to provide subject knowledge through an “allegation that Texas City had knowledge of latent perils at the man-made Dike rests on circumstantial evidence and inferences alleged to arise from evidence that, prior to Hurricane Ike, Texas City (1) had posted warning signs—including signs that said: “Beware. Undertow and wake, rip currents, and sink holes,” “No lifeguard on duty. Swim at your own risk,” and “Swim in designated area only”—but failed to replace the signs after the hurricane; (2) had previously provided a “designated swimming area” somewhere at the beach but had not established such an area after Hurricane Ike; and (3) knew an unspecified number of drowning deaths had previously occurred at unknown locations along the Dike over the course of an unspecified time period.” *Id.* The Supreme Court rejected plaintiff’s argument holding that to “the extent this evidence raises any inference that the City knew uniquely perilous conditions existed at the beach (or the Dike generally), the evidence is equally consistent with mere knowledge of risks inherently associated with open-water swimming. As such, it is no evidence of subjective awareness of and conscious indifference to the enhanced marine hazards alleged to have caused or contributed to the drowning deaths of Hector Suarez and his daughters.” *Id.*

Chapter 75 establishes the standard of care even when the plaintiff had to pay for admission to the recreational facility. Shumake, 131 S.W.3d at 81. Henry, 2014 WL 5465704 \*6.

The amendments to Chapter 75 of the Texas Civil Practice and Remedies Code require municipalities or counties that own, operate,



or maintain recreation facilities at which hockey, in-line hockey, skating, in-line skating, roller-skating, skateboarding, and/or roller-blading are conducted must post a specified notice. TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE ANN. § 75.002(g). However, the statute does not specify the consequence of failing to post the notice.

TEX. CIV. PRAC. & REM. CODE ANN. § 75.002(g) (Vernon Supp. 2000).

The fact that the governmental entity did not build or maintain the recreational facility does not remove it from the protection of the Recreational Use Statute. Stephen F. Austin Univ. v. Flynn, 228 S.W.3d 653 (Tex. 2007). In Flynn, Stephen F. Austin gave an easement to the City of Nacogdoches for a part of its campus for inclusion in a hike and bike trail. *Id.* The trail was built and maintained by the city. While the university did not maintain the trail, it did not lose its protection under the Recreational Use Statute. *Id.* The purpose of the Recreational Use Statute is to encourage landowners to open their property to the public for recreational use. *Id.* Thus, the Supreme Court held that it would be wrong for the university to lose the protection of the act when the only reason for giving the easement was for the inclusion of a part of the campus in the city’s hike and bike trail. *Id.*

Additionally, the plaintiff does not need express permission from the land owner to use the land in order for their claim to fall under the Recreational Use Statute. Stephen F. Austin Univ. v. Flynn, 228 S.W.3d 653 (Tex. 2007). The statute does not specify how permission is to be given. *Id.* Permission can be implied from the landowner’s knowledge of and acquiescence to the public’s use of the land for recreational purposes. *Id.* Flynn was deemed to have the university’s permission to go on the property by the fact that the university gave an easement to the city authorizing the city to include part of its campus in a hike and bike trail. *Id.*

In that regard various plaintiff’s have argued that different standards of care should be applied under the RUS depending on whether the plaintiff was a know trespasser. See Bernhard v. City of Aransas Pass, No. 13-13-00354-CV, 2014 WL 3541677 \*6 (Tex.App.—Corpus Christi) (July 17, 2014, no pet.) (requesting the court adopt the higher standard of care for known trespassers set forth in 336 of the Restatement (Second) of Torts). Despite numerous invitations to adopt a higher standard of care for known trespasser, the Supreme Court has refused to alter the standard of care:

Whether Texas common law has, or should, distinguish between different types of trespassers does not control our decision.....  
 . Neither this distinction nor any other

disagreement about the common law’s treatment of trespassers is controlling here because the Legislature did not purport to adopt these common law principles as its liability standard in section 75.0052(d).

Shumake, 199 S.W.3d 279, 286 (Tex. 2006).

#### D. Criminal Activities by Third Parties.

Under limited circumstances, liability may exist for an owner/occupier of premises when an invitee is injured by the intentional or criminal act of another. Such liability may the owner/occupier knows or has reason to know that criminal acts are likely to occur. When such activity is foreseeable, the landowner may have a duty to take steps to offer reasonable protection against attacks. Kendrick v. Allright Parking, 846 S.W.2d 453 (Tex.App.—San Antonio 1992, pet. denied).

A governmental entity may also be liable for the intentional or criminal acts of a third person. Section 101.057(2) of the TCA provides that the TCA’s waiver of sovereign immunity does not extend to claims arising out of assault, battery, false imprisonment, or any other intentional tort. TEX. TORT CLAIMS ACT § 101.057(2). This section has been construed to apply only to the conduct of government employees. Delaney, 835 S.W.2d at 56. Therefore, a government premises owner/occupier may have liability for the criminal or intentional acts of a third party in the same manner as a private owner/occupier. *Id.* But see Univ. of Tex. El Paso v. Moreno, 172 S.W.2d 281 (Tex.App.—El Paso 2005, no pet.) (University was not liable where plaintiff was injured from criminal actions of others - tearing down goal posts at a football game - not as a result of any defect in the property at issue, that is, the goal posts).

#### IX. CONCLUSION

Three issues must be addressed before bringing or defending suit against a governmental entity under the TCA. The first issue that must be considered in any claim or potential claim involving a governmental entity is whether there is a waiver of immunity from suit and a waiver of immunity from liability by statute. Unless the claim is authorized by statute, the suit should be dismissed under the doctrine of sovereign immunity.

Last, considerable thought must be given to how the case should be submitted to the jury, and what objections and exceptions need to be made in order to preserve for appeal any complaints regarding the jury charge.

