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ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

August 30, 2016

Mr. Steven J. Blanco
Counsel for the Socorro Independent School District
Blanco Ordonez Mata & Wallace, P.C.
5715 Cromo Drive
El Paso, Texas 79912

OR2016-19631

Dear Mr. Blanco:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under the Public Information Act (the "Act"), chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 624565.

The Socorro Independent School District (the "district"), which you represent, received a request for the 2015-2016 climate survey for a specified school. You state some information has been released to the requestor. You claim some of the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.103, and 552.117 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information. We have also received and considered comments from the requestor. *See* Gov't Code § 552.304 (interested party may submit comments stating why information should or should not be released).

Section 552.103 of the Government Code provides, in part:

(a) Information is excepted from [required public disclosure] if it is information relating to litigation of a civil or criminal nature to which the state or a political subdivision is or may be a party or to which an officer or employee of the state or a political subdivision, as a consequence of the person's office or employment, is or may be a party.

...

(c) Information relating to litigation involving a governmental body or an officer or employee of a governmental body is excepted from disclosure under Subsection (a) only if the litigation is pending or reasonably anticipated on the date that the requestor applies to the officer for public information for access to or duplication of the information.

Gov't Code § 552.103(a), (c). A governmental body that claims an exception to disclosure under section 552.103 has the burden of providing relevant facts and documentation sufficient to establish the applicability of this exception to the information that it seeks to withhold. To meet this burden, the governmental body must demonstrate that (1) litigation is pending or reasonably anticipated on the date the governmental body receives the request for information, and (2) the information at issue is related to the pending or anticipated litigation. *See Univ. of Tex. Law Sch. v. Tex. Legal Found.*, 958 S.W.2d 479, 481 (Tex. App.—Austin 1997, no pet.); *Heard v. Houston Post Co.*, 684 S.W.2d 210, 212 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1984, writ ref'd n.r.e.); Open Records Decision No. 551 at 4 (1990). The governmental body must meet both prongs of this test for information to be excepted from disclosure under section 552.103(a). *See* ORD 551 at 4.

This office has long held that for the purposes of section 552.103, “litigation” includes “contested cases” conducted in a quasi-judicial forum. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 474 (1987), 368 (1983), 336 (1982), 301 (1982). Likewise, “contested cases” conducted under the Texas Administrative Procedure Act, chapter 2001 of the Government Code, constitute “litigation” for purposes of section 552.103. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 588 (1991) (concerning former State Board of Insurance proceeding), 301 (concerning hearing before Public Utilities Commission). In determining whether an administrative proceeding is conducted in a quasi-judicial forum, some of the factors this office considers are whether the administrative proceeding provides for discovery, evidence to be heard, factual questions to be resolved, the making of a record, and whether the proceeding is an adjudicative forum of first jurisdiction with appellate review of the resulting decision without a re-adjudication of fact questions. *See* ORD 588.

You inform us that prior to the district's receipt of the instant request for information, the requestor filed a grievance with the district. You explain that grievances filed with the district are “litigation” because the district follows administrative procedures in handling such disputes. You state the district's grievance process is a multi-level hearing process wherein a hearing officer hears evidence, the grievant is entitled to seek information to support her claims, and the hearing officer may resolve factual questions. Additionally, you represent the grievant is allowed to be represented by counsel, present evidence to the district, and may appeal the hearing officer's decision to the district's Board of Trustees. Based on your representations and our review, we find you have demonstrated the district's administrative procedure for disputes is conducted in a quasi-judicial forum and, thus, constitutes litigation for purposes of section 552.103. Therefore, we determine the district was involved in pending litigation at the time it received the instant request. You state the

information at issue directly relates to the subject of this pending litigation. Based on your representations and our review, we find the information at issue is related to the pending litigation. Therefore, we conclude the district may withhold the information you have indicated under section 552.103 of the Government Code.¹

Generally, however, once information has been obtained by all parties to the litigation through discovery or otherwise, no section 552.103(a) interest exists with respect to that information. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 349 (1982), 320 (1982). Thus, information that has either been obtained from or provided to all parties to the pending litigation is not excepted from disclosure under section 552.103(a) and must be disclosed. Further, the applicability of section 552.103(a) ends once the litigation has been concluded. *See* Attorney General Opinion MW-575 (1982); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 350 (1982).

In summary, the district may withhold the information you have indicated under section 552.103 of the Government Code. The district must release the remaining information.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular information at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other information or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For more information concerning those rights and responsibilities, please visit our website at http://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/open/orl_ruling_info.shtml, or call the Office of the Attorney General's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. Questions concerning the allowable charges for providing public information under the Act may be directed to the Office of the Attorney General, toll free, at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,



Ian Lancaster
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

IML/akg

¹As our ruling is dispositive, we need not address your remaining arguments against disclosure of this information.

Ref: ID# 624565

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)