



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

May 11, 2017

Ms. Erin Higginbotham
Counsel for City of Westlake Hills
Bojorquez Law Firm, PLLC
12325 Hymeadow Drive, Suite 2-100
Austin, Texas 78750

OR2017-10171

Dear Ms. Higginbotham:

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# 657125.

The City of Westlake Hills (the "city"), which you represent, received a request for information, including e-mails, pertaining to a specified topic during a specified period of time. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.107, and 552.137 of the Government Code. We have also received and considered comments from the requestor. *See* Gov't Code § 552.304 (permitting interested third party to submit to attorney general reasons why requested information should or should not be released). We have considered the submitted arguments and reviewed the submitted information.

Section 552.107(1) of the Government Code protects information coming within the attorney-client privilege. When asserting the attorney-client privilege, a governmental body has the burden of providing the necessary facts to demonstrate the elements of the privilege in order to withhold the information at issue. *See* Open Records Decision No. 676 at 6-7 (2002). First, a governmental body must demonstrate the information constitutes or documents a communication. *Id.* at 7. Second, the communication must have been made "to facilitate the rendition of professional legal services" to the client governmental body. TEX. R. EVID. 503(b)(1). The privilege does not apply when an attorney or representative is involved in some capacity other than that of providing or facilitating professional legal services to the client governmental body. *In re Tex. Farmers Ins. Exch.*, 990

S.W.2d 337, 340 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 1999, orig. proceeding) (attorney-client privilege does not apply if attorney acting in capacity other than that of attorney). Governmental attorneys often act in capacities other than that of professional legal counsel, such as administrators, investigators, or managers. Thus, the mere fact that a communication involves an attorney for the government does not demonstrate this element. Third, the privilege applies only to communications between or among clients, client representatives, lawyers, and lawyer representatives. TEX. R. EVID. 503(b)(1)(A), (B), (C), (D), (E). Thus, a governmental body must inform this office of the identities and capacities of the individuals to whom each communication at issue has been made. Lastly, the attorney-client privilege applies only to a confidential communication, *id.* 503(b)(1), meaning it was “not intended to be disclosed to third persons other than those: (A) to whom disclosure is made to further the rendition of professional legal services to the client; or (B) reasonably necessary to transmit the communication.” *Id.* 503(a)(5). Whether a communication meets this definition depends on the *intent* of the parties involved at the time the information was communicated. *See Osborne v. Johnson*, 954 S.W.2d 180, 184 (Tex. App.—Waco 1997, orig. proceeding). Moreover, because the client may elect to waive the privilege at any time, a governmental body must explain the confidentiality of a communication has been maintained. Section 552.107(1) generally excepts an entire communication that is demonstrated to be protected by the attorney-client privilege unless otherwise waived by the governmental body. *See Huie v. DeShazo*, 922 S.W.2d 920, 923 (Tex. 1996) (privilege extends to entire communication, including facts contained therein).

You state the information you have marked consists of communications between attorneys for the city and city employees and representatives that were made for the purpose of providing legal services to the city. You state the communications were intended to be confidential and have remained confidential. Based on your representations and our review, we find the information you have marked consists of privileged attorney-client communications. Thus, the city may generally withhold the information you have marked under section 552.107(1) of the Government Code.

We note, however, some of these otherwise privileged e-mail strings include e-mails received from or sent to non-privileged parties. Furthermore, if the e-mails received from or sent to non-privileged parties are removed from the otherwise privileged e-mail strings in which they appear and stand alone, they are responsive to the request for information. Therefore, if these non-privileged e-mails, which we have marked, are maintained by the city separate and apart from the otherwise privileged e-mail strings in which they appear, then the city may not withhold these non-privileged e-mails under section 552.107(1).

Section 552.137 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure “an e-mail address of a member of the public that is provided for the purpose of communicating electronically with a governmental body” unless the member of the public consents to its release or the e-mail address is of a type specifically excluded by subsection (c). Gov’t Code § 552.137(a)-(c). The e-mail address at issue is not a type specifically excluded by section 552.137(c) of the

Government Code. Accordingly, the city must withhold the e-mail address you have marked and we marked under section 552.137 of the Government Code, unless the owner of the e-mail address affirmatively consent to its disclosure.

In summary, the city may generally withhold the information you have marked under section 552.107(1) of the Government Code. However, if the non-privileged e-mails, which we marked, are maintained by the city separate and apart from the otherwise privileged e-mail strings in which they appear, then the city may not withhold this information under section 552.107(1) of the Government Code. The city must withhold the personal e-mail address you have marked and we marked under section 552.137 of the Government Code, unless its owner affirmatively consents to its public disclosure. The city 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,



Ellen Webking
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

EW/bw

Ref: ID# 657125

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)