



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

February 11, 2019

Ms. Lori J. Robinson
Counsel for Austin Community College
Bickerstaff Heath Delgado Acosta, LLP
3711 South MoPac Expressway, Building One, Suite 300
Austin, Texas 78746

OR2019-03925

Dear Ms. Robinson:

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# 750116.

Austin Community College (the "college"), which you represent, received a request for 1) e-mails to or from two named individuals pertaining to specified topics during a specified time period, 2) e-mails between two named officials during a specified time period, and 3) specified policies and statistics.¹ You state you will release some information to the requestor. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections

¹We note the requestor modified his request. *See* Gov't Code § 552.222(b) (governmental body may communicate with requestor for purposes of clarifying or narrowing request). *See also City of Dallas v. Abbott*, 304 S. W.3d 380, 387 (Tex. 2010) (holding that when governmental entity, acting in good faith, requests clarification or narrowing of unclear or overbroad request for public information, ten-day period to request attorney general ruling is measured from date request is clarified or narrowed).

552.107, 552.111, and 552.137 of the Government Code.² We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.³

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).

²Although you also raise section 552.101 of the Government Code, you make no arguments to support this exception. Therefore, we assume you have withdrawn your claim that this section applies to the submitted information. *See* Gov’t Code §§ 552.301, .302.

³We assume that the “representative sample” of records submitted to this office is truly representative of the requested records as a whole. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 499 (1988), 497 (1988). This open records letter does not reach, and therefore does not authorize the withholding of, any other requested records to the extent that those records contain substantially different types of information than that submitted to this office.

You state Exhibit B consists of communications between attorneys for the college, a representative of the college's attorneys, college employees, and college officials that were made for the purpose of providing legal services to the college. You state the communications were intended to be confidential and have remained confidential. Based on your representations and our review, we find Exhibit B consists of privileged attorney-client communications the college may generally withhold under section 552.107(1) of the Government Code. We note, however, one of these otherwise privileged e-mail strings includes an attachment received from a non-privileged party. Furthermore, if the attachment received from a non-privileged party is removed from the otherwise privileged e-mail string in which it appears and stands alone, it is responsive to the request for information. Therefore, if this non-privileged attachment, which we have marked, is maintained by the college separate and apart from the otherwise privileged e-mail string in which it appears, then the college may not withhold this non-privileged attachment under section 552.107(1).

Section 552.111 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure “[a]n interagency or intraagency memorandum or letter that would not be available by law to a party in litigation with the agency[.]” Gov’t Code § 552.111. This exception encompasses the deliberative process privilege. *See* Open Records Decision No. 615 at 2 (1993). The purpose of section 552.111 is to protect advice, opinion, and recommendation in the decisional process and to encourage open and frank discussion in the deliberative process. *See Austin v. City of San Antonio*, 630 S.W.2d 391, 394 (Tex. App.—San Antonio 1982, writ ref’d n.r.e.); Open Records Decision No. 538 at 1-2 (1990).

In Open Records Decision No. 615, this office re-examined the statutory predecessor to section 552.111 in light of the decision in *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ). We determined section 552.111 excepts from disclosure only those internal communications that consist of advice, recommendations, opinions, and other material reflecting the policymaking processes of the governmental body. *See* ORD 615 at 5. A governmental body’s policymaking functions do not encompass routine internal administrative or personnel matters, and disclosure of information about such matters will not inhibit free discussion of policy issues among agency personnel. *Id.*; *see also City of Garland v. Dallas Morning News*, 22 S.W.3d 351 (Tex. 2000) (section 552.111 not applicable to personnel-related communications that did not involve policymaking). A governmental body’s policymaking functions do include administrative and personnel matters of broad scope that affect the governmental body’s policy mission. *See* Open Records Decision No. 631 at 3 (1995).

Further, section 552.111 does not protect facts and written observations of facts and events severable from advice, opinions, and recommendations. *Arlington Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Tex. Attorney Gen.*, 37 S.W.3d 152 (Tex. App.—Austin 2001, no pet.); *see* ORD 615 at 5. But if factual information is so inextricably intertwined with material involving advice, opinion, or recommendation as to make severance of the factual data impractical, the factual

information also may be withheld under section 552.111. *See* Open Records Decision No. 313 at 3 (1982).

This office has also concluded a preliminary draft of a document intended for public release in its final form necessarily represents the drafter's advice, opinion, and recommendation with regard to the form and content of the final document, so as to be excepted from disclosure under section 552.111. *See* Open Records Decision No. 559 at 2 (1990) (applying statutory predecessor). Section 552.111 protects factual information in the draft that also will be included in the final version of the document. *See id.* at 2-3. Thus, section 552.111 encompasses the entire contents, including comments, underlining, deletions, and proofreading marks, of a preliminary draft of a policymaking document that will be released to the public in its final form. *See id.* at 2.

You seek to withhold Exhibits C, D, and E under section 552.111 of the Government Code. You state Exhibits C, D, and E consist of advice, opinions, and recommendations of employees and officials of the college regarding policymaking matters. You further state that portions of Exhibits C, D, and E consist of draft documents that were released in their final forms. Upon review, we find the college may withhold the information we have marked in Exhibits C, D, and E under section 552.111 of the Government Code. However, we find the remaining information in Exhibits C, D, and E consists of information that is administrative or purely factual in nature. Thus, you have failed to demonstrate the remaining information at issue reveals advice, opinions, or recommendations that pertain to policymaking. Accordingly, the college may not withhold any portion of the remaining information in Exhibits C, D, and E under section 552.111 of the Government Code on the basis of the deliberative process privilege.

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 college must withhold the e-mail address we have marked under section 552.137 of the Government Code, unless the owner of the e-mail address affirmatively consents to its disclosure. However, we find the remaining information at issue does not consist of e-mail addresses for purposes of section 552.137. Therefore, the college may not withhold any of the remaining information at issue under section 552.137.

In summary, the college may generally withhold Exhibit B under section 552.107(1) of the Government Code; however, the college may not withhold the marked non-privileged attachment if it is maintained separate and apart from the otherwise privileged e-mail string in which it appears. The college may withhold the information we have marked in Exhibits C, D, and E under section 552.111 of the Government Code. The college must withhold the e-mail address we have marked under section 552.137 of the Government Code, unless the

owner of the e-mail address affirmatively consents to its disclosure. The college 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Meredith L. Coffman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Meredith L. Coffman
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

MLC/EB

Ref: ID# 750116

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)