



**KEN PAXTON**  
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

September 23, 2020

Ms. Allison A. Bastian-Rodriguez  
Counsel for the City of Harlingen  
Denton, Navarro, Rocha, Bernal & Zech, P.C.  
701 East Harrison, Suite 100  
Harlingen, Texas 78550-9165

OR2020-24034

Dear Ms. Bastian-Rodriguez:

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# 845286.

The City of Harlingen (the "city"), which you represent, received a request for invoices received or paid from specified entities providing legal services to the city. You state the city will release some information to the requestor. You claim some of the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.136 of the Government Code and privileged under rule 503 of the Texas Rules of Evidence.<sup>1</sup> We have considered your arguments and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.<sup>2</sup>

Initially, we note, and you acknowledge, the submitted information consists of attorney fee bills that are subject to section 552.022(a)(16) of the Government Code. Section 552.022(a)(16) provides for required public disclosure of "information that is in a bill for attorney's fees and that is not privileged under the attorney-client privilege" unless the

---

<sup>1</sup> Although you also raise section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with Texas Rule of Evidence 503, this office has concluded section 552.101 does not encompass discovery privileges. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 676 at 1-2 (2002), 575 at 2 (1990). Accordingly, we do not address your argument under section 552.101.

<sup>2</sup> We assume 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 those records contain substantially different types of information than that submitted to this office.

information is expressly confidential under the Act or other law. Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(16). The Texas Supreme Court has held the Texas Rules of Evidence are "other law" within the meaning of section 552.022. *See In re City of Georgetown*, 53 S.W.3d 328, 336 (Tex. 2001). Accordingly, we will address your assertion of the attorney-client privilege under rule 503 of the Texas Rules of Evidence for the submitted attorney fee bills.

Texas Rule of Evidence 503(b)(1) provides as follows:

A client has a privilege to refuse to disclose and to prevent any other person from disclosing confidential communications made to facilitate the rendition of professional legal services to the client:

(A) between the client or the client's representative and the client's lawyer or the lawyer's representative;

(B) between the client's lawyer and the lawyer's representative;

(C) by the client, the client's representative, the client's lawyer, or the lawyer's representative to a lawyer representing another party in a pending action or that lawyer's representative, if the communications concern a matter of common interest in the pending action;

(D) between the client's representatives or between the client and the client's representative; or

(E) among lawyers and their representatives representing the same client.

TEX. R. EVID. 503(b)(1). A communication is "confidential" if it is not intended to be disclosed to third persons other than those to whom disclosure is made in furtherance of the rendition of professional legal services to the client or those reasonably necessary for the transmission of the communication. *Id.* 503(a)(5).

Thus, in order to withhold attorney-client privileged information from disclosure under rule 503, a governmental body must (1) show the document is a communication transmitted between privileged parties or reveals a confidential communication; (2) identify the parties involved in the communication; and (3) show the communication is confidential by explaining it was not intended to be disclosed to third persons and it was made in furtherance of the rendition of professional legal services to the client. Upon a demonstration of all three factors, the information is privileged and confidential under rule 503, provided the client has not waived the privilege or the document does not fall within the purview of the exceptions to the privilege enumerated in rule 503(d). *See Pittsburgh Corning Corp. v. Caldwell*, 861 S.W.2d 423, 427 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1993, orig. proceeding).

You state the information you indicated documents communications between outside counsel for the city and city employees and officials that were made for the purpose of facilitating the rendition of professional legal services to the city. Further, you state the communications at issue were intended to be and have remained confidential. Based upon your representations and our review, we find you have demonstrated the applicability of the attorney-client privilege to some of the information at issue. Accordingly, the city may withhold the privileged attorney-client communications, a representative sample of which we marked, under Texas Rule of Evidence 503. However, we find you failed to demonstrate the remaining information at issue documents privileged attorney-client communications. Accordingly, the city may not withhold any portion of the remaining information at issue under Texas Rule of Evidence 503.

Section 552.136 of the Government Code provides, “[n]otwithstanding any other provision of [the Act], a credit card, debit card, charge card, or access device number that is collected, assembled, or maintained by or for a governmental body is confidential.” Gov’t Code § 552.136(b); *see id.* § 552.136(a) (defining “access device”). Accordingly, the city must withhold the information we marked under section 552.136 of the Government Code. However, we find you have not demonstrated any of the remaining information at issue consists of a credit card, debit card, or charge card number, or is an access device number. *See id.* §§ 552.136(a), .301(e)(1)(A) (governmental body must explain how claimed exception to disclosure applies). Therefore, we find the city may not withhold it on this ground.

In summary, the city may withhold the privileged attorney-client communications, a representative sample of which we marked, under Texas Rule of Evidence 503. The city must withhold the information we marked under section 552.136 of the Government Code. 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 <https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/open-government/members-public/what-expect-after-ruling-issued> or call the OAG’s Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. Questions concerning the allowable charges for providing public information under the Public Information Act may be directed to the Cost Rules Administrator of the OAG, toll free, at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,

Deborah Southerland  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

DS/gw

Ref: ID# 845286

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor  
(w/o enclosures)