



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

December 17, 2020

Ms. Heather Stebbins
Kerr County Attorney
Kerr County Attorney's Office
700 Main Street, Suite BA-103
Kerrville, Texas 78028

OR2020-31703

Dear Ms. Stebbins:

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# 858932.

The Kerr County Attorney's Office (the "county attorney's office") received a request for all communications sent or received by specified individuals pertaining to a specified topic. The county attorney's office claims the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.107 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception the county attorney's office claims and reviewed the submitted information.

Section 552.107(1) of the Government Code protects information coming within the attorney-client privilege. *See* Gov't Code § 552.107(1). 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. 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 a 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 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). 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.*, 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. *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).

The county attorney’s office claims the submitted information is protected by section 552.107(1) of the Government Code. The county attorney’s office states the information at issue consists of communications involving Kerr County’s (the “county”) attorneys, officials, staff, and other privileged parties. The county attorney’s office also states the communications were made for the purpose of facilitating the rendition of professional legal services to the county and that these communications have remained confidential. Based on these representations and our review, we find the county attorney’s office has demonstrated the applicability of the attorney-client privilege to the information at issue. Thus, the county attorney’s office may generally withhold the submitted information under section 552.107(1) of the Government Code. We note, however, some of these e-mail strings include an e-mail received from a non-privileged party. Furthermore, if this e-mail is removed from the e-mail strings and stands alone, it is responsive to the request for information. Therefore, if this non-privileged e-mail, which we marked, is maintained by the county attorney’s office separate and apart from the otherwise privileged e-mail strings in which it appears, then the county attorney’s office may not withhold this non-privileged e-mail under section 552.107(1) of the Government Code.

We note the remaining information contains an e-mail address that is subject to section 552.137 of the Government Code.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). *See Gov’t Code* § 552.137(a)-(c). The e-mail address at issue is not excluded by subsection (c). Therefore, the county attorney’s office must withhold the personal e-mail address we marked under section 552.137 of the Government Code, unless the owner affirmatively consents to its public disclosure.

¹ The Office of the Attorney General will raise a mandatory exception on behalf of a governmental body, but ordinarily will not raise other exceptions. *See Open Records Decision Nos. 481 (1987), 480 (1987), 470 (1987).*

In summary, the county attorney's office may generally withhold the submitted information under section 552.107(1) of the Government Code; however, if the non-privileged e-mail we marked is maintained by the county attorney's office separate and apart from the otherwise privileged e-mail strings in which it appears, then the county attorney's office may not withhold this non-privileged e-mail under section 552.107(1). In this instance, the county attorney's office must withhold the personal e-mail address we marked under section 552.137 of the Government Code, unless the owner affirmatively consents to its public disclosure. The county attorney's office must release any 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,

Gerald A. Arismendez
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

GAA/be

Ref: ID# 858932

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)