



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

August 23, 2022

Ms. Alexandra Fielder
Assistant County Attorney
Nueces County Attorney's Office
901 Leopard Street, Room 207
Corpus Christi, Texas 78401-3689

OR2022-25375

Dear Ms. Fielder:

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# 967146 (COATTYFILE# 22-OR-146).

Nueces County (the "county") received a request for all grievances filed by county employees during a specified time period. You state you have released some information to the requestor. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.103, 552.117, and 552.137 of the Government Code.¹ We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Section 552.103 of the Government Code provides, in relevant part, as follows:

(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.

...

¹ Although you do not raise sections 552.117 and 552.137 of the Government Code in your brief, we understand you to assert these exceptions based on your markings. We note you did not comply with section 552.301(b) of the Government Code in requesting a ruling from this office with respect to sections 552.117 and 552.137 of the Government Code. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(b). Nonetheless, because sections 552.117 and 552.137 of the Government Code can provide compelling reasons to overcome the presumption of openness, we will consider their applicability to the submitted information. *See id.* §§ 552.007, .302, .352.

(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 has the burden of providing relevant facts and documents to show section 552.103(a) is applicable in a particular situation. The test for meeting this burden is a showing (1) litigation was pending or reasonably anticipated on the date the governmental body received the request for information, and (2) the information at issue is related to that litigation. *See Univ. of Tex. Law Sch. v. Tex. Legal Found.*, 958 S.W.2d 479, 481 (Tex. App.—Austin 1997, orig. proceeding); *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). A governmental body must meet both prongs of this test for information to be excepted under section 552.103(a). *See* ORD 551.

This office has long held “litigation,” for purposes of section 552.103, includes “contested cases” conducted in a quasi-judicial forum. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 474 (1987), 368 (1983), 336 (1982), 301 (1982). 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* Open Records Decision No. 588 (1991).

You assert the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.103 of the Government Code. We note, however, the purpose of section 552.103 is to enable a governmental body to protect its position in litigation by forcing parties to obtain information related to litigation through the discovery process. *See* ORD 551 at 4-5. Thus, once the opposing party in pending litigation has seen or had access to information that is related to the litigation, there is no interest in withholding such information from public disclosure under section 552.103. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 349 (1982), 320 (1982). Therefore, the county may not withhold under section 552.103 information that the opposing party to the litigation has not seen or had access to. In this instance, the opposing party has seen or had access to the information at issue. Accordingly, the county may not withhold any portion of the submitted information under section 552.103 of the Government Code.

Section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code excepts from disclosure the home addresses and telephone numbers, emergency contact information, social security number, and family member information of a current or former employee of a governmental body who requests this information be kept confidential under section 552.024. Gov't Code § 552.117(a)(1). Whether a particular piece of information is protected by section 552.117(a)(1) must be determined at the time the request for it is made. *See* Open Records Decision No. 530 at 5 (1989). Thus, the county may only withhold the information at issue under section 552.117(a)(1) if the individual at issue elected confidentiality under section 552.024 prior to the date on which the request for this information was made. Therefore, to the extent the former employee at issue timely requested confidentiality under section 552.024 of the

Government Code, the county must withhold the information we have marked under section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code.² Conversely, to the extent the former employee at issue did not timely request confidentiality under section 552.024, the county may not withhold the information under section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code. Further, we find you failed to demonstrate the remaining information at issue is subject to section 552.117(a)(1). Thus, the county may not withhold any of the remaining information under section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code.

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 must withhold the personal e-mail address you have marked under section 552.137 of the Government Code, unless the owner affirmatively consents to its public disclosure.

In summary, to the extent the former employee at issue timely requested confidentiality under section 552.024 of the Government Code, the county must withhold the information we have marked under section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code. The county must withhold the personal e-mail address you have marked under section 552.137 of the Government Code, unless the owner affirmatively consents to its public disclosure. The county 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,

Tim Neal
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

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² Regardless of the applicability of section 552.117 of the Government Code, we note section 552.147(b) of the Government Code authorizes a governmental body to redact a living person's social security number from public release without the necessity of requesting a decision from this office. *See Gov't Code* § 552.147(b).

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Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)