



July 18, 2001

Mr. Michael Hernandez
Bracewell & Patterson, L.L.P.
800 One Alamo Center
106 South St. Mary's Street
San Antonio, Texas 78205-3603

OR2001-3120

Dear Mr. Hernandez:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 149569.

The San Antonio Water System (the "system"), which you represent, received a request for several categories of information related to a contract between the system and the Aluminum Company of America. You state that you will release to the requestor information responsive to the request, with the exception of information responsive to request item nos. 1 and 5(a) and (g). You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.107 of the Government Code. We have considered your claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Attorney fee bills are subject to section 552.022(a) of the Government Code, which provides in pertinent part as follows:

- (a) Without limiting the amount or kind of information that is public information under this chapter, the following categories of information are public information and not excepted from required disclosure under this chapter unless they are expressly confidential under other law:

....

(16) information that is in a bill for attorney's fees and that is not privileged under the attorney-client privilege.

Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(16). Under section 552.022, fee bills must be released unless they are expressly confidential under other law. You claim that the submitted information is excepted from required disclosure under section 552.107 of the Government Code. Section 552.107, which excepts information within the attorney-client privilege, is a discretionary exception under the Public Information Act and does not constitute "other law" for purposes of section 552.022. *See* Open Records Decision No. 630 at 4 (1994) (governmental body may waive section 552.107(1)). However, the attorney-client privilege is also found in Rule 503 of the Texas Rules of Evidence. Recently, the Texas Supreme Court held that "[t]he Texas Rules of Civil Procedure and Texas Rules of Evidence are 'other law' within the meaning of section 552.022." *In re City of Georgetown*, No. 00-0453, 2001 WL 123933, at *8 (Tex. Feb. 15, 2001). Thus, we will determine whether the information is confidential under Rule 503.

Rule 503(b)(1) provides:

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

- (A) between the client or a representative of the client and the client's lawyer or a representative of the lawyer;
- (B) between the lawyer and the lawyer's representative;
- (C) by the client or a representative of the client, or the client's lawyer or a representative of the lawyer, to a lawyer or a representative of a lawyer representing another party in a pending action and concerning a matter of common interest therein;
- (D) between representatives of the client or between the client and a representative of the client; or
- (E) among lawyers and their representatives representing the same client.

Tex. R. Evid. 503(b)(1). A communication is "confidential" if 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. *See* Tex. R. Evid. 503(a)(5).

Accordingly, in order to withhold attorney-client privileged information from disclosure under Rule 503, a governmental body must 1) show that 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 that the communication is confidential by explaining that it was not intended to be disclosed to third persons and that it was made in furtherance of the rendition of professional legal services to the client. Upon a demonstration of all three factors, the document containing privileged information is 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, no writ); *see also* Tex. R. Evid. 511 (waiver of privilege by voluntary disclosure).

You state that “[t]he [system’s] purpose in communication [sic] with outside counsel was to seek legal expertise and to receive advice and opinions of a legal nature.” After reviewing your arguments and the attorney fee bills submitted to this office, we conclude that you have demonstrated that some of the attorney invoices contain entries that are confidential communications made for the purpose of facilitating the rendition of professional legal services to the client. We have marked those invoices which may be withheld under Rule 503. The rest of the information must be released.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records 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 records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov’t Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body’s intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one

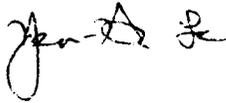
of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at 877/673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.--Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the General Services Commission at 512/475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



Yen-Ha Le
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

YHL/DKB/seg

Ref: ID# 149569

Enc. Marked documents

c: Ms. Billie Woods
President
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(w/o enclosures)