ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

December 12, 2003

Mr. Scott A. Kelly
Deputy General Counsel
The Texas A&M University System
200 Technology Way, Suite 2079
College Station, Texas 77845-3424

OR2003-8977

Dear Mr. Kelly:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 192646.

The Texas A&M University System (the "university") received a request for certain information pertaining to a business entity's manufacturing, distribution, and delivery of its feeds. Although the university does not take a position with regard to the release of most of the requested information, it indicates that this information may be excepted from disclosure pursuant to sections 552.101, 552.104, and 552.110 of the Government Code. Pursuant to section 552.305(d) of the Government Code, the university notified an interested third party, Alderman-Cave Feeds ("ACF"), of the university's receipt of the request and of ACF's right to submit arguments to this office as to why information relating to ACF should not be released to the requestor. *See* Gov't Code § 552.305(d); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 542 (1990) (determining that statutory predecessor to section 552.305 permits governmental body to rely on interested third party to raise and explain applicability of exception to disclosure under Public Information Act (the "Act") in certain circumstances). The university claims that portions of the remaining requested information are excepted from disclosure pursuant to sections 552.101 and 552.107(1) of the Government Code.[1] We have

[1] Although you claim that portions of the remaining requested information are excepted from disclosure pursuant to section 552.101 of the Government Code, we note that the appropriate exception to disclosure to assert when claiming that information requested of a governmental body is protected under the attorney-client privilege is section 552.107(1) of the Government Code. *See* Open Records Decision No. 676

considered the university's claimed exceptions to disclosure and have reviewed the submitted information.

Initially, we note that an interested third party is allowed ten business days after the date of its receipt of the governmental body's notice under section 552.305(d) to submit its reasons, if any, as to why requested information relating to that party should be withheld from disclosure. *See* Gov't Code § 552.305(d)(2)(B). As of the date of this letter, ACF has not submitted comments to this office explaining why any portion of the requested information should not be released to the requestor. Therefore, we have no basis to conclude that the release of any portion of the submitted information would implicate ACF's proprietary interests. *See, e.g.*, Open Records Decision Nos. 552 at 5 (1990) (party must establish *prima facie* case that information is trade secret), 661 at 5-6 (1999) (stating that business enterprise that claims exception for commercial or financial information under section 552.110(b) must show by specific factual evidence that release of requested information would cause that party substantial competitive harm). Accordingly, we conclude that the university may not withhold any portion of the submitted information on the basis of any third party proprietary interest.[2]

However, we note that portions of Exhibit B are excepted from disclosure pursuant to section 552.136 of the Government Code. Section 552.136 provides:

> (a) In this section, "access device" means a card, plate, code, account number, personal identification number, electronic serial number, mobile identification number, or other telecommunications service, equipment, or instrument identifier or means of account access that alone or in conjunction with another access device may be used to:
>
> (1) obtain money, goods, services, or another thing of value; or
>
> (2) initiate a transfer of funds other than a transfer originated solely by paper instrument.

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at 2-3 (2002) (appropriate law for claim of attorney-client privilege for information not subject to section 552.022 is section 552.107(1) of Government Code). Accordingly, we will address your section 552.101 claim regarding these portions of the remaining requested information in conjunction with your section 552.107(1) claim.

[2] Consequently, we do not address whether any portion of the information that the university submitted to us for review as Exhibit B is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.104, or 552.110 of the Government Code.

> (b) Notwithstanding any other provision of this chapter, 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. Accordingly, we conclude that the university must withhold the bank account numbers that we have marked in Exhibit B pursuant to section 552.136 of the Government Code. The university must release the remaining portions of Exhibit B to the requestor.

You claim that the highlighted portions of the information that you submitted to us for review as Exhibit C are excepted from disclosure pursuant to section 552.107(1) of the Government Code. Section 552.107(1) protects information that is encompassed by the attorney-client privilege. *See* Gov't Code § 552.107(1). When asserting the attorney-client privilege, a governmental body maintains 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 that the information constitutes or documents a communication. *See id.* at 7. Second, the communication must have been made "for the purpose of facilitating the rendition of professional legal services" to the client governmental body. *See* 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. *See In re Texas 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. *See* 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, *see id.* 503(b)(1), meaning it was "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 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, no writ). Moreover, because the client may elect to waive the privilege at any time, a governmental body must explain that 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).

Based on your arguments and our review of the highlighted information in Exhibit C, we agree that this information reflects confidential communications exchanged between privileged parties in furtherance of the rendition of legal services to a client. Accordingly, we conclude that the university may withhold the entirety of this highlighted information pursuant to section 552.107(1) of the Government Code. However, the university must release the remaining portions of Exhibit C to the requestor.

In summary, with the exception of the information that we have marked in Exhibit B that must be withheld pursuant to section 552.136 of the Government Code and the highlighted information in Exhibit C that may be withheld pursuant to section 552.107(1) of the Government Code, the university must release the submitted information to the requestor.

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).

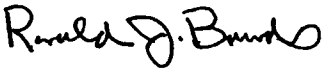
If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following 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 Dep't of Pub. 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 Texas Building and Procurement 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. We note that a third party may challenge this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. 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,



Ronald J. Bounds
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

RJB/lmt

Ref: ID# 192646

Enc. Marked documents

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