



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

July 17, 2014

Mr. W. Montgomery Meitler
Senior Counsel
Office of Legal Services
Texas Education Agency
1701 North Congress Avenue
Austin, Texas 78701-1494

OR2014-12397

Dear Mr. Meitler:

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# 530044 (TEA PIR No. 21992).

The Texas Education Agency (the "agency") received a request for eighteen categories of information regarding Beaumont Independent School District (the "district").¹ You state the agency will release some of the requested information. You claim portions of the submitted information are excepted from disclosure under sections 552.107 and 552.116 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.²

¹You state the agency sought and received clarification of the request for information. *See* Gov't Code § 552.222(b) (stating that if information requested is unclear to governmental body or if a large amount of information has been requested, governmental body may ask requestor to clarify or narrow request, but may not inquire into purpose for which information will be used).

²We 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 that those records contain substantially different types of information than that submitted to this office.

Initially, you state portions of the requested information were the subject of previous requests for information, as a result of which this office issued Open Records Letter Nos. 2014-11727 (2014), 2014-08513 (2014), 2013-15863 (2013), 2012-20199 (2012), 2011-08090 (2011), 2011-04693 (2011), and 2010-06403 (2010). We have no indication there has been any change in the law, facts, or circumstances on which these previous rulings were based. Accordingly, to the extent the requested information is identical to the information previously requested and ruled upon by this office, we conclude the agency may rely on Open Records Letter Nos. 2014-11727, 2014-08513, 2013-15863, 2012-20199, 2011-08090, 2011-04693, and 2010-06403 as previous determinations and withhold or release the identical information in accordance with those rulings. *See* Open Records Decision No. 673 (2001) (so long as law, facts, and circumstances on which prior ruling was based have not changed, first type of previous determination exists where requested information is precisely same information as was addressed in prior attorney general ruling, ruling is addressed to same governmental body, and ruling concludes that information is or is not excepted from disclosure).

Section 552.107(1) of the Government Code protects information that comes within the attorney-client privilege. 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. *See* 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 “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 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 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, lawyer representatives, and a lawyer representing another party in a pending action and concerning a matter of common interest therein. *See* 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 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). 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, 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).

You claim the information you have marked is protected by section 552.107(1) of the Government Code. You state the information at issue consists of documents communicated between an agency attorney and agency employees made for the purpose of facilitating the rendition of professional legal services to the agency. You further state these communications have remained confidential. Based on your representations and our review, we find you have demonstrated the applicability of the attorney-client privilege to the information at issue. Thus, the agency may withhold the information you have marked under section 552.107(1) of the Government Code.

Section 552.116 of the Government Code provides the following:

(a) An audit working paper of an audit of the state auditor or the auditor of a state agency, an institution of higher education as defined by Section 61.003, Education Code, a county, a municipality, a school district, a hospital district, or a joint board operating under Section 22.074, Transportation Code, including any audit relating to the criminal history background check of a public school employee, is excepted from the requirements of Section 552.021. If information in an audit working paper is also maintained in another record, that other record is not excepted from the requirements of Section 552.021 by this section.

(b) In this section:

(1) "Audit" means an audit authorized or required by a statute of this state or the United States, the charter or an ordinance of a municipality, an order of the commissioners court of a county, the bylaws adopted by or other action of the governing board of a hospital district, a resolution or other action of a board of trustees of a school district, including an audit by the district relating to the criminal history background check of a public school employee, or a resolution or other action of a joint board described by Subsection (a) and includes an investigation.

(2) "Audit working paper" includes all information, documentary or otherwise, prepared or maintained in conducting an audit or preparing an audit report, including:

- (A) intra-agency and interagency communications; and
- (B) drafts of the audit report or portions of those drafts.

Gov't Code § 552.116. You state the information you have marked consists of audit working papers prepared or maintained by the agency's Division of Complaints and Investigations in conjunction with audits of the district. You inform us these audits are authorized by section 39.057(a)(4) of the Education Code, which permits special accreditation investigations to be conducted in response to established compliance reviews of a school district's financial accounting practices and state and federal program requirements. *See* Educ. Code § 39.057 (listing circumstances in which commissioner shall authorize investigations). Upon review, we agree section 552.116 is applicable to the information at issue. Therefore, the agency may withhold the information you have marked under section 552.116 of the Government Code.

In summary, the agency may continue to rely on Open Records Letter Nos. 2014-11727, 2014-08513, 2013-15863, 2012-20199, 2011-08090, 2011-04693, and 2010-06403 as previous determinations and withhold or release the identical information in accordance with those rulings. The agency may withhold the information you have marked under section 552.107(1) and section 552.116 of the Government Code.

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 http://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/open/orl_ruling_info.shtml, or call the Office of the Attorney General's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. Questions concerning the allowable charges for providing public information under the Act may be directed to the Office of the Attorney General, toll free, at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,



Britni Fabian
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

BF/tch

Ref: ID# 530044

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)