



January 15, 2015

Ms. Sarah Parker
Associate General Counsel
Texas Department of Transportation
125 East 11th Street
Austin, Texas 78701-2483

OR2015-00885

Dear Ms. Parker:

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# 550263.

The Texas Department of Transportation (the "department") received two requests from the same requestor for multiple categories of communications, documentation, and information related to the requestor and other specified department employees, department policies, and the requestor's termination by the department. You state you have released some information to the requestor. You claim the remaining requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.107 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.¹

Initially, you state some of the responsive information was the subject of a previous request for information, in response to which this office issued Open Records Letter No. 2014-21708 (2014). We have no indication there has been any change in the law, facts, or circumstances on which the previous ruling was based. Accordingly, to the extent the requested

¹We assume that 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.

information is identical to the information previously requested and ruled upon by this office, we conclude the department must rely on Open Records Letter No. 2014-21708 as a previous determination and release the identical information in accordance with that ruling. *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). To the extent the remaining requested information was not previously ruled on, we will address your submitted arguments.

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 constitutes communications involving employees of the department and an attorney representing the department. You state the communications were made in confidence for the purpose of seeking and providing legal advice and that the 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 you have marked. Therefore, the department may withhold the information you have marked under section 552.107 of the Government Code.

In summary, to the extent the requested information is identical to the information previously requested and ruled upon by this office, we conclude the department must rely on Open Records Letter No. 2014-21708 as a previous determination and release the identical information in accordance with that ruling. The department may withhold the information you have marked under section 552.107 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,



Rustam Abedinzadeh
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

RA/dls

Ref: ID# 550263

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)