



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

June 2, 2010

Ms. Christine Badillo
Attorney for Copperas Cove Independent School District
Walsh, Anderson, Brown, Gallegos & Green, P.C.
P.O. Box 2156
Austin, Texas 78768

OR2010-08114

Dear Ms. Badillo:

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# 381635.

Copperas Cove Independent School District (the "district"), which you represent, received a request for "all legal expenses incurred by the [district] associated with [the requestor's sons] and all legal expenses incurred by the [district] for the last three fiscal years, including the months since the last fiscal year began." You claim that portions of the requested information are excepted from disclosure under section 552.107 of the Government Code and privileged under Texas Rule of Evidence 503.¹ We have considered your arguments and reviewed the submitted information.

Initially, we note that the district has redacted portions of the submitted information. You do not assert, nor does our review of our records indicate, that the district has been authorized to withhold this information without seeking a ruling from this office. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(a); Open Records Decision 673 (2000). Therefore, the district has failed to comply with section 552.301(e) with regard to the redacted information. *See* Gov't Code

¹Although you raise section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with rule 503 of the Texas Rules of Evidence, this office has concluded that section 552.101 does not encompass discovery privileges. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 676 at 1-2 (2002), 575 at 2 (1990). Thus, we will not address your claim that the submitted information is confidential under section 552.101 in conjunction with this rule.

§ 552.301(e)(1)(D) (governmental body requesting decision from attorney general must submit copy of specific information requested).

In this instance, we are not able to discern the nature of the information the district has redacted. Thus, because we are not able to review this redacted information, we have no means of determining whether it is excepted from release pursuant to the Act. Therefore, pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, the district must release the redacted information, to the extent such information is not subject to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ("FERPA"), 20 U.S.C. § 1232g. If you believe the information is confidential and may not lawfully be released, you must challenge this ruling in court pursuant to section 552.324 of the Government Code. In the future, the district must not redact requested information that it submits to this office in seeking an open records ruling, unless the information is the subject of a previous determination under section 552.301 or is subject to FERPA. *See Gov't Code §§ 552.301(e)(1)(D), .302; Open Records Decision No. 673 (2001).*

As you acknowledge, the submitted attorney fee bills are subject to section 552.022(a)(16) of the Government Code, which provides that information in a bill for attorney's fees must be released unless it is privileged under the attorney-client privilege or is expressly confidential under other law. *See Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(16).* Although you assert that information contained in the submitted attorney fee bills is excepted from disclosure by section 552.107 of the Government Code, this section is a discretionary exception under the Act and does not constitute "other law" for purposes of section 552.022. *See Open Records Decision Nos. 676 at 10-11 (2002) (attorney-client privilege under section 552.107(1) may be waived), 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary exceptions generally).* Accordingly, the district may not withhold information contained in the submitted attorney fee bills under section 552.107. However, you also assert that the submitted attorney fee bills are privileged under the attorney-client privilege found in rule 503 of the Texas Rules of Evidence. The Texas Supreme Court has held that the Texas Rules of Evidence are "other law" within the meaning of section 552.022. *See In re City of Georgetown, 53 S.W.3d 328, 336 (Tex. 2001).* Therefore, we will determine whether the district may withhold any of the information in the attorney fee bills under Texas Rule of Evidence 503.

Rule 503 enacts the attorney-client privilege, providing in relevant part:

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. *Id.* 503(a)(5).

Thus, in order to withhold 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 information is privileged and 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).

You claim that the submitted fee bills are confidential in their entirety under rule 503. However, section 552.022(a)(16) of the Government Code provides that information "that is *in* a bill for attorney's fees" is not excepted from required disclosure unless it is confidential under other law or privileged under the attorney-client privilege. *See* Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(16) (emphasis added). This provision, by its express language, does not permit the entirety of an attorney fee bill to be withheld. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 676 (2002) (attorney fee bill cannot be withheld in entirety on basis it contains or is attorney-client communication pursuant to language in section 552.022(a)(16)), 589 (1991) (information in attorney fee bill excepted only to extent information reveals client confidences or attorney's legal advice). This office has found that only information that is specifically demonstrated to be protected by the attorney-client privilege or made confidential by other law may be withheld from fee bills. *See* ORD 676 at 8 (governmental body must inform this office of identities and capacities of individuals to whom each communication at issue has been made; this office cannot necessarily assume that communication was made only among categories of individuals identified in rule 503); *see generally* Open Records Decision No. 150 (1977) (predecessor to Act places burden on governmental body to establish why and how exception applies to requested information); *Strong v. State*, 773 S.W.2d 543, 552 (Tex. Crim. App. 1989) (burden of establishing

attorney-client privilege is on party asserting it). Thus, under rule 503, the district may withhold only the parts of the submitted attorney fee bills that you specifically demonstrate consist of privileged communications.

You state the submitted attorney fee bills contain confidential communications between the district's outside attorneys and district employees. You state these communications were made for the purpose of facilitating the rendition of professional legal services to the district. Further, you state that the submitted fee bills were intended to be, and have remained, confidential. We note, however, that you have failed to identify some of the parties to the communications in the submitted attorney fee bills. *See* ORD 676 at 8 (governmental body must inform this office of identities and capacities of individuals to whom each communication at issue has been made; this office cannot necessarily assume that communication was made only among categories of individuals identified in rule 503); *see generally* Open Records Decision No. 150 (1977) (stating that predecessor to the Act places burden on governmental body to establish why and how exception applies to requested information); *Strong v. State*, 773 S.W.2d 543, 552 (Tex. Crim. App. 1989) (burden of establishing attorney-client privilege is on party asserting it). Accordingly, the district may withhold the information we have marked on the basis of the attorney-client privilege under Texas Rule of Evidence 503. However, you have failed to demonstrate that any of the remaining information documents privileged attorney-client communications. Accordingly, none of the remaining information may be withheld under Texas Rule of Evidence 503. As you raise no further exceptions to disclosure, the remaining information must be released to the requestor.

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.oag.state.tx.us/open/index_orl.php, 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 must be directed to the Cost Rules Administrator of the Office of the Attorney General, toll free, at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,



Adam Leiber
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

ACL/rl

Ref: ID# 381635

Enc. Submitted documents

cc: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)