



**FINAL DETERMINATION**

**IN THE MATTER OF**

**JOHN YAKIM,  
Requester**

**v.**

**GREGG TOWNSHIP,  
Respondent**

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**Docket No: AP 2018-1645**

**INTRODUCTION**

John Yakim (“Requester”) submitted a request (“Request”) to Gregg Township (“Township”) pursuant to the Right-to-Know Law (“RTKL”), 65 P.S. §§ 67.101 *et seq.*, seeking emails to and from an identified email account. The Township partially denied the Request. The Requester appealed to the Office of Open Records (“OOR”). For the reasons set forth in this Final Determination, the appeal is **denied**, and the Township is not required to take any further action.

**FACTUAL BACKGROUND**

On September 11, 2018, the Request was filed seeking “all emails to or from kerimiller.greggtownship@gmail.com for January 2018.” On August 23, 2018, the Township partially denied the Request, providing all responsive records except one email that is protected by attorney-client privilege.

On August 24, 2018, the Requester appealed to the OOR, arguing that the Township did not meet its burden of withholding the responsive records. The OOR invited both parties to

supplement the record and directed the Township to notify any third parties of their ability to participate in this appeal. *See* 65 P.S. § 67.1101(c).

On September 24, 2018, the Township submitted a position statement reiterating its grounds for denial. In support of its position, the Township submitted the affidavit made under the penalty of perjury from Jennifer Snyder, Open Records Officer, attesting that this matter relates to a matter pending before the OOR at *Grove v. Gregg Township*, OOR Dkt. AP 2018-1517. Ms. Snyder attests that she provided the Requester with all the responsive January emails that were provided in the related *Grove* matter. Ms. Snyder further explains that one email, sent between the Township Supervisor and its legal counsel, was withheld from the Requester in both this matter and the *Grove* matter.

### **LEGAL ANALYSIS**

“The objective of the Right to Know Law ... is to empower citizens by affording them access to information concerning the activities of their government.” *SWB Yankees L.L.C. v. Wintermantel*, 45 A.3d 1029, 1041 (Pa. 2012). Further, this important open-government law is “designed to promote access to official government information in order to prohibit secrets, scrutinize the actions of public officials and make public officials accountable for their actions.” *Bowling v. Office of Open Records*, 990 A.2d 813, 824 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2010), *aff’d* 75 A.3d 453 (Pa. 2013).

The OOR is authorized to hear appeals for all Commonwealth and local agencies. *See* 65 P.S. § 67.503(a). An appeals officer is required “to review all information filed relating to the request” and may consider testimony, evidence and documents that are reasonably probative and relevant to the matter at issue. 65 P.S. § 67.1102(a)(2). An appeals officer may conduct a hearing to resolve an appeal. The law also states that an appeals officer may admit into evidence testimony,

evidence and documents that the appeals officer believes to be reasonably probative and relevant to an issue in dispute. *Id.* The decision to hold a hearing is discretionary and non-appealable. *Id.*; *Giurintano v. Pa. Dep't of Gen. Servs.*, 20 A.3d 613, 617 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2011). Here, the parties did not request a hearing; and the OOR has the requisite information and evidence before it to properly adjudicate the matter.

The Township is a local agency subject to the RTKL that is required to disclose public records. 65 P.S. § 67.302. Records in possession of a local agency are presumed public unless exempt under the RTKL or other law or protected by a privilege, judicial order or decree. *See* 65 P.S. § 67.305. Upon receipt of a request, an agency is required to assess whether a record requested is within its possession, custody or control and respond within five business days. 65 P.S. § 67.901. An agency bears the burden of proving the applicability of any cited exemptions. *See* 65 P.S. § 67.708(b).

Section 708 of the RTKL places the burden of proof on the public body to demonstrate that a record is exempt. In pertinent part, Section 708(a) states: “(1) The burden of proving that a record of a Commonwealth agency or local agency is exempt from public access shall be on the Commonwealth agency or local agency receiving a request by a preponderance of the evidence.” 65 P.S. § 67.708(a)(1). The burden of proof in claiming a privilege is on the party asserting that privilege. *Levy v. Senate of Pa.*, 34 A.3d 243, 249 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2011). Preponderance of the evidence has been defined as “such proof as leads the fact-finder ... to find that the existence of a contested fact is more probable than its nonexistence.” *Pa. State Troopers Ass'n v. Scolforo*, 18 A.3d 435, 439 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2011) (quoting *Pa. Dep't of Transp. v. Agric. Lands Condemnation Approval Bd.*, 5 A.3d 821, 827 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2010)).

The Township asserts it withheld an email pursuant to the attorney-client privilege. The RTKL defines “privilege” as “[t]he attorney-client privilege, the doctor-patient privilege, the speech and debate privilege or other privilege recognized by a court interpreting the laws of this Commonwealth.” 65 P.S. § 67.102. In order for the attorney-client privilege to apply, an agency must demonstrate that: 1) the asserted holder of the privilege is or sought to become a client; 2) the person to whom the communication was made is a member of the bar of a court, or his subordinate; 3) the communication relates to a fact of which the attorney was informed by his client, without the presence of strangers, for the purpose of securing either an opinion of law, legal services or assistance in a legal matter, and not for the purpose of committing a crime or tort; and 4) the privilege has been claimed and is not waived by the client. *See Nationwide Mut. Ins. Co. v. Fleming*, 924 A.2d 1259, 1263-64 (Pa. Super. Ct. 2007). “[A]fter an agency establishes the privilege was properly invoked under the first three prongs, the party challenging invocation of the privilege must prove waiver under the fourth prong.” *Office of the Governor v. Davis*, 122 A.3d 1185, 1192 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2014) (citing *Id.*). An agency may not rely on a bald assertion that the attorney-client privilege applies; instead, the agency must prove all four elements. *See Clement v. Berks County*, OOR Dkt. AP 2011-0110, 2011 PA O.O.R.D. LEXIS 139 (“Simply invoking the phrase ‘attorney-client privilege’ or ‘legal advice’ does not excuse the agency from the burden it must meet to withhold records”). The attorney-client privilege protects only those disclosures necessary to obtain informed legal advice, where the disclosure might not have occurred absent the privilege, and where the client’s goal is to obtain legal advice. *Joe v. Prison Health Services, Inc.*, 782 A.2d 24 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2001).

Ms. Snyder attests that the withheld email is a communication between attorney and client, seeking advice from the solicitor regarding procedures at public meetings. Recently, the OOR

issued a Final Determination in *Grove v. Gregg Township*, OOR Dkt. AP 2018-1517, 2018 P.A. O.O.R.D. LEXIS \_\_\_\_\_, involving the same records. In the *Grove* appeal, the OOR conducted *in camera* review and determined that the email withheld in this matter is protected by the attorney-client privilege. In accordance with the OOR's holding in *Grove*, the Township properly withheld the email at issue in this appeal.

### CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, Requester's appeal is **denied**, and the Township is not required to take any further action. This Final Determination is binding on all parties. Within thirty days of the mailing date of this Final Determination, any party may appeal to the Centre County Court of Common Pleas. 65 P.S. § 67.1302(a). All parties must be served with notice of the appeal. The OOR also shall be served notice and have an opportunity to respond as per Section 1303 of the RTKL. However, as the quasi-judicial tribunal adjudicating this matter, the OOR is not a proper party to any appeal and should not be named as a party.<sup>1</sup> This Final Determination shall be placed on the OOR website at: <http://openrecords.pa.gov>.

**FINAL DETERMINATION ISSUED AND MAILED: November 6, 2018**

/s/ Jill S. Wolfe

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APPEALS OFFICER  
JILL S. WOLFE, ESQ.

Sent to: John Yakim (via email only);  
David Gaines, Esq. (via email only);  
Jennifer Snyder (via email only)

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<sup>1</sup> See *Padgett v. Pa. State Police*, 73 A.3d 644, 648 n.5 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2013).