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January 13, 2010

Mr. Alan E. Greenfield
Alan E. Greenfield, P.A.
Post Office Box 801706
Aventura, Florida 33280-1706

Dear Mr. Greenfield:

Your firm, as attorneys for the City of Coral Gables Retirement System, recently asked an for Attorney General Opinion relating to the promulgation of an administrative rule providing that participation by a member of the board by electronic media technology constitutes his or her physical presence at a board meeting for purposes of establishing a quorum. In response to this request, Attorney General McCollum issued AGO 2009-56 on December 11, 2009.

On January 8, 2010, this office received a request for clarification of that opinion. Your most recent letter requests that this office address the issue of "whether the City of Coral Gables, not the Board, could adopt an ordinance which removes the physical presence requirement" for purposes of establishing a quorum. The Florida Attorney General is statutorily authorized to provide legal opinions to governmental agencies such as the City of Coral Gables retirement board on questions relating to their own duties and responsibilities. No comment will be expressed on the authority of the City of Coral Gables to adopt such an ordinance in the absence of a request from the City itself. The City Council of the City of Coral Gables, by affirmative expression of a majority of the members, may request an Attorney General Opinion on this matter and, upon receipt of this request and the memorandum of law from the City Attorney, we will begin research. See section 16.01(3), Florida Statutes, and Department of Legal Affairs Statement of Policy Concerning Attorney General Opinions (copies enclosed).

Mr. Alan E. Greenfield
Page Two

Thank you for contacting this office for additional information on the opinions process. I regret that we cannot be of more direct assistance to you in this matter but trust you will understand that our authority is limited by statute.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Gerry Hammond".

Gerry Hammond
Senior Assistant Attorney General

GH/tsh

Enclosures: Section 16.01(3), Florida Statutes
Statement of Policy



STATE OF FLORIDA

BILL MCCOLLUM
ATTORNEY GENERAL

December 11, 2009

09-56

Mr. Alan E. Greenfield
Alan E. Greenfield, P.A.
Post Office Box 801706
Aventura, Florida 33280-1706

Dear Mr. Greenfield:

On behalf of the retirement board of the City of Coral Gables, you have asked for my opinion on substantially the following question:

May members of the City of Coral Gables retirement board promulgate a rule allowing the use of electronic media technology in conducting board meetings and stating that there is no physical presence requirement to constitute a quorum for the conduct of official business, that is, that participation by a member of the board by electronic media technology constitutes his or her presence for purposes of establishing a quorum?

In sum:

The City of Coral Gables retirement board is not authorized to adopt a rule allowing the use of electronic media technology in conducting board meetings and providing that participation by a member of the board by electronic media technology constitutes his or her physical presence at the meeting for purposes of establishing a quorum.

According to your letter, the retirement board of the City of Coral Gables consists of nine unpaid members, five of whom are appointed by the city commission and four of whom are representatives from various employee groups. You advise that the employee representatives are frequently unable to attend meetings due to emergency situations or are required to leave meetings to respond to such emergencies. The professional and business representative members find that their business or professional schedules conflict with a scheduled Board meeting. Finally, you indicate that the board's consultants and money managers are located in various parts of the United States and cannot easily reschedule their calendars to accommodate meetings.

Mr. Alan E. Greenfield
Page Two

that may be cancelled due to the absence of a quorum. You state that it would facilitate the functions of the retirement board to be allowed to conduct its business through the use of electronic media and to meet the quorum requirement by counting both those board members who are physically present at a meeting as well as those who could attend remotely through electronic means. My review of the city's pension plan ordinances reveals that provisions exist specifically creating separate retirement systems for police officers and firefighters independent of this general retirement board for city employees. Thus, no discussion of any requirements of pension boards operating under Chapters 175 and 185, Florida Statutes, is contained herein.

Administration of the City of Coral Gables retirement system is placed in the retirement board.¹ Among the specific powers the board may exercise in administering the retirement system are the following:

(1) To determine all facts with regard to any participant's age, normal retirement date, disability, amount of compensation, length of service and credited service and date of initial coverage under the system and, by application of the facts so determined and any other facts deemed material, to determine a participant's amount of benefit.

(2) To make rules and regulations for the administration of the system which are not inconsistent with the terms and provisions hereof.

* * *

(5) [T]o select, employ and compensate from time to time such pension consultants, actuaries, accountants, attorneys, investment managers and other agents and employees as the retirement board may deem necessary or advisable in the proper and efficient administration of the system and the trust agreement. . . .

* * *

(11) To cause a general investigation to be made by a competent actuary, and at least once every five years thereafter, of the retirement, disability, separation, mortality, interest and employee earning rates; recommend, as a result of such investigation, the tables to be adopted for all required actuarial calculations; and cause an annual determination to be made by a competent actuary of the liabilities and reserves of the system and the annual determination of the amount of the contributions required by the city and to maintain the funds of the system on a sound actuarial basis.

Mr. Alan E. Greenfield
Page Three

Any investigations, audits, determinations, or actuarial studies shall be at the expense of the retirement system.

(12) To cause an audit of the affairs of the system to be made annually by an independent certified public accountant and submit a copy thereof to all interested parties as soon as possible after the end of such fiscal year.²

The code of ordinances provides a quorum requirement for the board:

A quorum of the retirement board, for the retirement board to transact business, shall consist of six retirement board members.³

Further, "[a]ll actions and decisions of the retirement board shall require the concurrence of a majority of the members of the retirement board."⁴

Florida's Government in the Sunshine Law, section 286.011, Florida Statutes, ensures a right of access to government proceedings at the state and local levels.⁵ The Sunshine Law was enacted in the public interest to protect the public from "closed door" politics and must be broadly construed to effect its remedial and protective purpose.⁶ A fundamental requirement of the Government in the Sunshine Law is that meetings of entities subject to the provisions of the Sunshine Law be "open to the public." "Open to the public," as that phrase is used in section 286.011, Florida Statutes, means open to all persons who choose to attend.⁷ Further, Florida courts have held that the Sunshine Law extends to discussions and deliberations as well as formal actions taken by a public board or commission.⁸

Although members of municipal boards do not appear to be precluded from utilizing the Internet to conduct informal discussions, such discussions which are subject to the Sunshine Law are required to be accessible to the public.⁹ Groups such as the retirement board of the City of Coral Gables must, therefore, ensure that access is provided to all members of the public who wish to attend such discussions.¹⁰

In addition, access must be available not only to those members of the public possessing a computer with internet access, but also to those who may not have access to the Internet. As this office concluded in Attorney General Opinion 2001-66, places within the jurisdiction of a board subject to the Sunshine Law must be designated where computers with internet access will be made available to members of the public who wish to participate in such discussions. The notice of these discussions, required under the Sunshine Law, should include the locations where such computers with Internet access will be located.

Mr. Alan E. Greenfield
Page Four

For meetings where a quorum is required, this office, in a number of formal and informal opinions, has stated that concerns about the validity of official actions taken by a public body when less than a quorum is present suggest a very conservative reading of the statute.¹¹ This office has concluded that, in the absence of a statute to the contrary, the requisite number of members must be physically present at a meeting in order to constitute a quorum.¹² While a quorum is not required for a meeting to be subject to the Government in the Sunshine Law,¹³ to the extent that any advisory body is required to have a quorum in order to conduct official business, it appears that the members of these bodies must, in the absence of a statute to the contrary, be physically present in order to constitute a quorum.¹⁴

The term "quorum" is defined as "the number of members of a group or organization *required to be present* to transact business legally, usually a majority[.]"¹⁵ and "[t]he minimum number of members (usu. a majority of all the members) who must be present for a deliberative assembly to legally transact business."¹⁶ (e.s.) Thus, a quorum requirement, in and of itself, contemplates the physical presence of the members of a board or commission at any meeting subject to the requirement. While I acknowledge that the City of Coral Gables ordinances creating the retirement board and empowering it do not contain language referring to the physical presence of a quorum of the members for the transaction of board business, I believe that the legislative requirement of a quorum and the designation of the number required to constitute a quorum argues for the physical presence of that number of board members at a meeting.

You have called to my attention provisions of Chapter 120, Florida Statutes, the Administrative Procedures Act, which authorizes state agencies and their boards and commissions to adopt rules providing procedures for conducting public meetings, hearings, and workshops, in person and by means of communications media technology.¹⁷ This office, in Attorney General Opinion 98-28, considered whether this statute would authorize a school board, granted home rule powers and exercising those powers for school purposes, to adopt its own rules governing the use of electronic media technology for its meetings. The opinion notes provisions of the school code requiring the physical presence of a quorum and concludes that the district's grant of home rule authority would allow the district to adopt its own rules governing the use of electronic media technology for its meetings, subject to the limitation that a quorum of the board's members must be physically present at the meeting. However, unlike a school board or municipality, an administrative agency possesses no home rule powers and may only act within the scope of its legislative authorization.¹⁸

The retirement board of the City of Coral Gables is a local board made up of "citizens of the city" and persons employed by the city. You have advised this office

Mr. Alan E. Greenfield
Page Five

that problems have arisen not because of the physical disability of the members of the board or the fact that members are scattered throughout the state, but that business and professional schedules conflict with scheduled board meetings and members of the board have been called away to respond to work-related emergencies. In addition, the board's consultants and money managers find it difficult to schedule meetings with the board under these circumstances. In discussing the Legislature's determination that state agencies and their boards and commissions can conduct meetings via communications media technology, this office recognized the practicality of members from throughout the state participating in meetings of the board or commission and noted that:

While the convenience and cost savings of allowing members from diverse geographical areas to meet electronically might be attractive to a local board or commission such as a school board, the representation on a school board is local and such factors would not by themselves appear to justify or allow the use of electronic media technology in order to assemble the members for a meeting.¹⁹

The overarching concern of the Legislature with meaningful interaction by the public with their local representatives would not appear to be well served by allowing local governmental entities to conduct business at arms length through the use of communications media technology.

Likewise, in this situation, the occasional inconvenience to local board members of attending a meeting of the retirement board in person would not appear to this office to overcome the quorum requirements in the Coral Gables ordinance and the public policy consideration of meaningful interaction by the public with their local representatives as required by the Government in the Sunshine Law. This office has issued a number of opinions condoning the use of electronic media technology when an absent member is physically unable to attend a meeting due to medical treatment or physical infirmity. The retirement board of the City of Coral Gables may use electronic media technology in order to allow a physically absent member to attend a public meeting if a quorum of the members of the board is otherwise physically present at the meeting site. This office has also suggested that local governmental entities may conduct informal discussions and workshops over the Internet, provided proper notice is given and interactive access by members of the public is provided. However, those opinions specifically recognize that where a quorum is necessary for action to be taken, physical presence of the members making up the quorum is required in the absence of a statute providing otherwise.²⁰

Mr. Alan E. Greenfield
Page Six

Accordingly, it is my opinion that the City of Coral Gables retirement board is not authorized to promulgate a rule allowing the use of electronic media technology in conducting board meetings and providing that participation by a member of the board by electronic media technology constitutes his or her physical presence for purposes of establishing a quorum.

Sincerely,



Bill McCollum
Attorney General

BM/tgh

¹ Art. II, s. 50-82, Code of Ordinances of the City of Coral Gables.

² *Id.* at s. 50-94.

³ *Supra* n.1 at s. 50-89.

⁴ *Supra* n.1 at s. 50-90.

⁵ See also Art. I, s. 24, Fla. Const., providing a right of access to meetings of collegial public bodies. And see *Frankenmuth Mutual Insurance Company v. Magaha*, 769 So. 2d 1012, 1021 (Fla. 2000), noting that the Sunshine Law "is of both constitutional and statutory dimension."

⁶ See *Wood v. Marston*, 442 So. 2d 934, 938 (Fla. 1983); *Canney v. Board of Public Instruction of Alachua County*, 278 So. 2d 260 (Fla. 1973); *Board of Public Instruction of Broward County v. Doran*, 224 So. 2d 693 (Fla. 1969).

⁷ See, e.g., Ops. Att'y Gen. Fla. 99-53 (1999) and 01-66 (2001).

⁸ See *Hough v. Stembridge*, 278 So. 2d 288 (Fla. 3d DCA 1973) (Sunshine Law applies to any gathering, whether formal or casual, of two or more members of the same board or commission to discuss some matter upon which foreseeable action will be taken by the board or commission).

Mr. Alan E. Greenfield
Page Seven

⁹ See, e.g., Op. Att'y Gen. Fla. 89-39 (1989), stating that a board of county commissioners may use a computer network in the course of conducting county business, but cautions that any discussions between the members of the board via computer on issues pending before the board would be subject to the provisions of s. 286.011, Fla. Stat.

¹⁰ See Op. Att'y Gen. Fla. 01-66 (2001).

¹¹ See, e.g., Inf. Op. to John C. Randolph, dated November 24, 1997, and Ops. Att'y Gen. Fla. 01-66 (2001), 03-41 (2003), and 08-65 (2008).

¹² See, e.g., Ops. Att'y Gen. Fla. 83-100 (1983), 89-39 (1989), and 01-66 (2001).

¹³ See n.8, *supra*.

¹⁴ See Op. Att'y Gen. Fla. 98-28 (1998), recognizing that the authorization in s. 120.54(5)(b)2., Fla. Stat., for the use of communications media technology to conduct meetings applied only to state agencies.

¹⁵ Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary p.1588 (2003).

¹⁶ Black's Law Dictionary p. 1284 (8th ed., 2004).

¹⁷ Section 120.54(5)(b)2., Fla. Stat.

¹⁸ An administrative agency possesses no inherent power and may exercise only such authority as is expressly or by necessary implication conferred by law. See *Lang v. Walker*, 35 So. 78, 80 (Fla. 1903), *Gessner v. Del-Air Corporation*, 17 So. 2d 522 (Fla. 1944), Ops. Att'y Gen. Fla. 2004-30, 86-46 (1986), 78-101 (1978), 75-299 (1975), 71-28 (1971), 73 C.J.S. *Public Administrative Law and Procedure* s. 50 (1983). Any reasonable doubt as to the lawful existence of a particular power sought to be exercised by an administrative agency must be resolved against the exercise thereof. *State ex rel. Greenberg v. Florida State Board of Dentistry*, 297 So. 2d 628 (Fla. 1st DCA 1974), *cert. dismissed*, 300 So. 2d 900 (Fla. 1974); *City of Cape Coral v. G.A.C. Utilities, Inc., of Florida*, 281 So. 2d 493 (Fla. 1973).

¹⁹ See Op. Att'y Gen. Fla. 98-22 (1998).

²⁰ See Ops. Att'y Gen. Fla. 01-66 (2001) and 02-82 (2002).

Mr. Alan E. Greenfield
Page Eight

RE: RETIREMENT – ADMINISTRATIVE AGENCIES – GOVERNMENT
IN THE SUNSHINE LAW – MEETINGS – QUORUM – authority of
administrative agency to adopt rule allowing participation by electronic
means to constitute quorum. s. 286.011, Fla. Stat.

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September 22, 2009

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1 S.E. 3rd Avenue
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Dear Attorney General McCollum:

This office represents the City of Coral Gables Retirement System ("System"). The System was established by the Code of the City of Coral Gables, Florida under Ordinance No. 2887 for the purpose to provide benefits to regular and permanent employees of the city and their beneficiaries upon the occurrence of retirement, death or disability of the employee. It is requested on behalf of the City of Coral Gables Retirement Board ("Board") that an opinion be given by the Attorney General concerning quorums and participation at public meetings by use of modern electronic, video and telephonic technology.

The issue presented to us by the Board are:

(1) Whether a Board member(s), at a public meeting where action by the Board may occur, may use electronic means to attend a public meeting and be considered present to create a quorum;

We believe that absent any statute or ordinance to the contrary, the Board can conduct such meeting(s). However, we have some confusion caused by our review of several prior Attorney General formal and informal opinions.

This issue is of vital importance to the Board in its carrying out of its fiduciary duties to the System's participants and to the residents of the City of Coral Gables. The Board consists of 9 unpaid members, 5 of whom are appointed by the City Commission and 4 are representatives of the employees (police, fire and general). The business of the Board will be explained further in this request, however it is clear that the Board must conduct its business in a businesslike fashion. The proposal to utilize the electronic means for the Board Members to attend a public meeting will in no way affect the rights of the Public to have free access to the meeting and to

freely participate therein. Appropriate accommodations will be made to make certain that the Public will have all of the rights to participate, just as they now have. Further, the Public will avoid the inconvenience of having to attend a scheduled meeting, only to find that the meeting could not be held because of the lack of a quorum. The suggested changes will always assure the Public that a scheduled meeting will, in fact, take place as scheduled.

Coral Gables Ordinance 50-94 provides that the Board shall have the power to make rules and regulations for the administration of the system which are not inconsistent with the terms and provisions thereof. Coral Gables Ordinance 50-89 provides that at a public meeting, a quorum consists of at least six (6) Board members. Nowhere in either the City Ordinances or the City Code is a provision to prohibit the use of electronics and video, nor do the Code or the Ordinances compel physical presence of a member in order to constitute a quorum. The foregoing being the case, under the provision of Coral Gables Ordinance 50-69 which gives the Board to make rules, regulations and determinations which are consistent with the purposes of the Pension Ordinance, we believe the Board can count members participating by telephone or other electronic means to constitute a quorum to conduct business.

Florida Statute 120.54 (5)(b)(2) provides that state agencies could conduct public meetings via electronic means provided that the board complies with uniform rules of procedure adopted by the State Administration Commission. If a state agency can conduct such meetings with rules adopted by the State Administration Commission, there would be no logical reason to deny the Board to conduct such meetings in accordance with rules it adopts. Providing that there is no statutory provision which makes it mandatory to have the physical presence of the Board Members The Statute does not specifically speak to the issue of rule making as it relates to the use of electronic means to constitute a quorum, however, it does not prevent the use of the rule making power to prohibit such a rule.

The Retirement Board is charged with the duty to prudently manage a retirement fund of over \$200,000.000 and is composed of policeman, firemen, a general employee and 5 professional and business men who are residents of the community and all are unpaid for their services. Often times, the policeman and firemen are unable to attend due to emergencies or must leave a meeting because of such emergencies. Further the professional and business men who are Board Members find that their business or professional schedules conflict with a scheduled Board meeting. The Board's consultants and money managers are situated in various parts of the United States and cannot easily reschedule their calendars to accommodate the necessity of a cancellation of a meeting due to the lack of a quorum. It would facilitate the functions of this very important Board to be able to conduct required business although the quorum would be composed of persons present and others via electronic means.

By all means, in any event, the Board acknowledges that in carrying out its duties, it must do so by providing the public with not only access to the meeting place but also the right to interact with the Board whether by speaking with those Board members present as well as those who are present via electronic means.

Other Attorney General opinions rendered in the past such as:

(1) Attorney General Opinion 98-28 states in part that, "A school board may use electronic media technology in order for a physically absent member to attend a public meeting of the board if a quorum of the members is physically present."

(2) Attorney General Opinion 2002-82 states in part that, "Physically-disabled members of the City of Miami Beach Barrier-free Environment Committee may participate and vote on board matters by electronic means if they are unable to attend a public meeting so long as a quorum of the members of the board is physically present at the meeting site."

(3) Attorney General Opinion 2003-41 states in part that, "Concerns about the validity of official actions taken by a public body when less than a quorum is present argue for a very conservative reading of the statutes. Thus, this office has concluded that, in the absence of a statute to the contrary, a quorum of the members must be physically present at a meeting in order to take action." In the same opinion it further states that, "...it is my opinion that where a rule or statute contemplates that a meeting will be held in a public place with the members physically present, the participation of an absent member in the meeting by telephone conference should be permitted only in extraordinary circumstances and when a quorum of the board members is physically present at the meeting."

Most recently in an informal opinion by the Attorney General dated March 19, 2007, which cites Attorney General Opinion 2001-66, states in part that, "...For meetings at which a quorum was necessary for action to be taken, however, *the opinion concluded that physical presence of the members making up the quorum would be required in the absence of a statute providing otherwise.*"

The Attorney General Opinions cited above seem to state, in general, *and without citation to any Florida statutory or legal precedent*, that if a governing body requires a quorum for that governing body to take action, then physical presence by the members of that governing body is required in order to be counted for the purposes of creating a quorum. We respectfully suggest the law is otherwise.

The following questions all assume that the Board will comply with Florida's Sunshine laws in regards to public notification, access and participation:

(1) Could the City of Coral Gables, in its discretion adopt an ordinance or rule which states that there is no physical presence requirement to create a quorum as used in their ordinance? and

(2) could the Board, under their authority given to it by the City of Coral Gables's ordinances, promulgate a rule that does not require physical presence of the members of the

Board in order for them to be counted toward creating a quorum?

We believe that the technology which exists today is heads and shoulders better and far more sophisticated than the technology which was in existence in 1995, 1998 and even 2006. There should be no reason why, assuming it is financially feasible, for the Board to be able to create a quorum to conduct its meetings via interactive conferencing or telephone of some or all participating members regardless of their physical location, provided that the meeting is held in an advertised public place where the citizens could participate in the meeting.

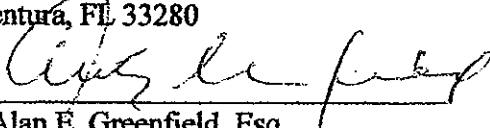
Unless there is direct statutory or established precedent by Florida case law, which would prohibit such a quorum and the resultant meeting, the same should be permitted.

We would appreciate your response to these issues at your earliest opportunity. Thank you.

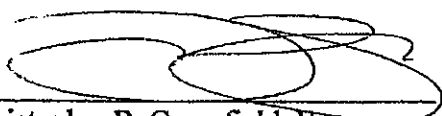
Sincerely,

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P.O. Box 801706
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by:


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FBN: 031559

by:


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January 8, 2010

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Attorney General Bill McCollum
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Dear Attorney General McCollum:

This office represents the City of Coral Gables Retirement System ("System"). We are in receipt of your Opinion dated December 11, 2009 (Attorney General Opinion 2009-56). It is requested on behalf of the City of Coral Gables Retirement Board ("Board") that clarification be given in regards to the above referenced Opinion.

On September 2, 2009, this office submitted to the Office of the Attorney General an opinion request on behalf of the System. The letter contained two (2) questions on which the Board requested an opinion be given. These questions were:

- (1) *Could the City of Coral Gables* adopt an ordinance which states that there is no physical presence requirement to create a quorum as used in their ordinance? and
- (2) *Could the Board*, under their authority given to it by the City of Coral Gables's ordinances, promulgate a rule that does not require physical presence of the members of the Board in order for them to be counted toward creating a quorum?

The December 11, 2009 Opinion appears to address the second question presented above however, it does not appear to address the first question which is whether the City of Coral Gables could adopt an ordinance whereby physical presence is not required to create a quorum.

In your December 11th Opinion, you state that, "This Office has concluded that, in the *absence of a statute to the contrary*, the requisite number of members must be physically present at a meeting in order to constitute a quorum. While a quorum is not required for a meeting to be subject to the Government in the Sunshine Law, to the extent that any advisory body is required to have a quorum to conduct official business, it appears that the members of these bodies must,

2nd. Pg. Ltr. Greenfield to McCollum
Re: Coral Gables Retirement System
January 8, 2010

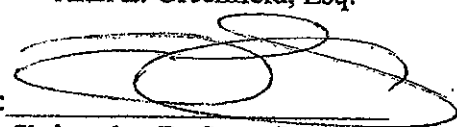
in the absence of a statute to the contrary, be physically present in order to constitute a quorum." This reasoning still leaves the first question proposed above unanswered and creates another question as to *whether an "ordinance" comes within your use of the term statute?* We understand that the City of Coral Gables can adopt a rule permitting a quorum to consist of members of a Board participating electronically.

Therefore, the question as to whether the City of Coral Gables, not the Board, could adopt an ordinance which removes the physical presence requirement remains unanswered by your Opinion. We would like a simple clarification that a City ordinance will comply with the requirements of your Opinion of December 11, 2009.

Respectfully submitted:

Alan E. Greenfield, P.A.
Attorneys for the System

By: 
Alan E. Greenfield, Esq.

By: 
Christopher B. Greenfield, Esq.