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City of Oak Harbor
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Release Date:

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Lawsuits by Former City of Oak Harbor Public Works Director and City Engineer Settled by WCIA Attorneys

Oak Harbor, WA, May 11, 2023 --- Washington Cities Insurance Authority (WCIA) –assigned attorneys settled two lawsuits from former City of Oak Harbor Public Works Director Cathy Rosen and City Engineer Joseph Stowell.

On September 5, 2018, Ms. Cathy Rosen, and Mr. Joseph Stowell, via legal counsel, issued a letter to Mayor Severns demanding \$1.25 million for Rosen and demanding \$600 thousand for Stowell from the City, claiming that if the City did not pay them these amounts, they would notify the press and pursue legal action. Of course, the City did not pay them for their spurious claims and, on October 12, 2018, Rosen and Stowell filed a Claim for Damages Form with the City of Oak Harbor.

On September 15, 2020, Rosen and Stowell filed a lawsuit against the City of Oak Harbor, City Administrator Blaine Oborn, and Mayor Robert Severns. The lawsuit was convoluted and difficult to understand, but generally revolved around issues related to the inflated costs of the Clean Water Facility (which was handled in large part by Rosen and Stowell and was the subject of massive cost overruns and criticism by the Mayor and citizens alike) and a press release Mayor Severns sent to the Whidbey News-Times, which criticized individuals involved in the handling of the Clean Water Facility for, among things, failing to communicate information about the cost increases.

The City responded to the Rosen & Stowell lawsuit on November 9, 2020, stating:

Defendants object to Plaintiffs Complaint, including multiple inflammatory false allegations that appear to be made for the sole, improper purpose of generating publicity.”

(Rosen)... should not be permitted to use the Court’s docket for the improper purpose of communicating false information. The City denies it violated any laws whatsoever. It values each of our employees and their contribution to success. As a result, the City has always strived to treat its employees fairly and equitably.

The City Administrator Oborn and Mayor Severns were advised not to publicly discuss the claims in the lawsuit. In spite of plaintiffs’ attempts to generate inaccurate publicity, the City has always made it clear that Rosen and Stowell confused legitimate accountability with harassment.

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On January 10, 2023, the Rosen lawsuit was mutually dismissed by the parties. On April 28, 2023, the Stowell lawsuit was mutually dismissed by the parties.

The following are questions from the Whidbey News-Times with City responses:

Why did you decide to settle?

The risk pool (WCIA) that handles all claims against the City made the decision to settle the claims even though there was no merit to the claims. The costs of defending against even false/spurious allegations can be significant, as is the time the City employees are required to expend in defending the City and responding to discovery requests. Any and all liability was and is specifically denied by the City, the Mayor, and City Administrator Oborn.

Why did it take so long?

Civil litigation takes time. Rosen and Stowell went through several lawyers. Some of the lawyers were very unresponsive.

What did you learn from depositions?

Only Rosen and Stowell were deposed. Their deposition testimony clearly supported the position of the City.

Did the Mayor or Oborn admit anything they had denied?

As mentioned above, the Mayor and City Administrator Oborn have always denied any culpability or improper conduct of any kind, and they have never wavered in those denials.

Now that the lawsuits are settled, Mayor Severns will soon release an update on the Clean Water Facility end of construction audit.

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Press Contact

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