

# Court of Claims of Ohio

The Ohio Judicial Center  
65 South Front Street, Third Floor  
Columbus, OH 43215  
614.387.9800 or 1.800.824.8263  
www.cco.state.oh.us

SHELLEY K. PITCHER

Case No. 2007-06438-AD

Plaintiff

Deputy Clerk Daniel R. Borchert

v.

## MEMORANDUM DECISION

OHIO DEPARTMENT OF  
TRANSPORTATION

Defendant

### FINDINGS OF FACT

{¶1} 1) On May 4, 2007, at approximately 6:15 a.m., plaintiff, Shelly K. Pitcher, was traveling east on Interstate 480 near the Interstate 71 entrance ramp, when her automobile struck a pothole causing tire damage to the vehicle. Plaintiff related she routinely drove on Interstate 71 and Interstate 480 in Cuyahoga County for the past several months preceding her damage incident and “noticed numerous potholes, especially between the I-71 north ramp to I-480 east and the West 130<sup>th</sup> exit ramp.”

{¶2} 2) Plaintiff asserted her property damage was proximately caused by negligence on the part of defendant, Department of Transportation (“DOT”), in failing to maintain the roadway. Plaintiff filed this complaint seeking to recover \$147.00, the cost of a replacement tire. The \$25.00 filing fee was paid and plaintiff requested reimbursement of that amount along with her damage claim.

{¶3} 3) Defendant explained the section of roadway where plaintiff’s incident occurred was located within a construction area under the control of DOT contractor, Karvo Paving Company (“Karvo”). The construction project, which involved roadway resurfacing, covered mileposts 6.78 to 8.97 on Interstate 480 in Cuyahoga County. The approximate location of plaintiff’s described incident was at milepost 8.70. It is unclear from evidence available if the damage-causing pothole was present on the roadway

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|------------------------|-------|---------------------|
| Case No. 2007-06438-AD | - 2 - | MEMORANDUM DECISION |
|------------------------|-------|---------------------|

before Karvo began construction activity. Defendant asserted Karvo, by contractual agreement, was responsible for maintaining the roadway within the construction zone. Therefore, DOT argued Karvo is the proper party defendant in this action.

{¶4} 4) Alternatively, defendant denied that neither DOT nor Karvo had any notice of the particular pothole on Interstate 480 prior to plaintiff's property damage event. Defendant denied receiving any calls or complaints regarding a pothole at milepost 8.70 on Interstate 480 prior to May 4, 2007. Defendant asserted plaintiff did not submit any evidence to determine the length of time the pothole existed on the roadway prior to May 4, 2007.

#### CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

{¶5} Defendant has the duty to maintain its highway in a reasonably safe condition for the motoring public. *Knickel v. Ohio Department of Transportation* (1976), 49 Ohio App. 2d 335, 3 O.O. 3d 413, 361 N.E. 2d 486. However, defendant is not an insurer of the safety of its highways. See *Kniskern v. Township of Somerford* (1996), 112 Ohio App. 3d 189, 678 N.E. 2d 273; *Rhodus v. Ohio Dept. of Transp.* (1990), 67 Ohio App. 3d 723, 588 N.E. 2d 864. The duty of DOT to maintain the roadway in a safe drivable condition is not delegable to an independent contractor involved in roadway construction. DOT may bear liability for the negligent acts of an independent contractor charged with roadway construction. *Cowell v. Ohio Department of Transportation*, Ct. of Cl. No. 2003-09343-AD, jud, 2004-Ohio-151. Despite defendant's contentions that DOT did not owe any duty in regard to the construction project, defendant was charged with duties to inspect the construction site and correct any known deficiencies in connection with particular construction work. See *Roadway Express, Inc. v. Ohio Dept. of Transp.* (June 28, 2001), Franklin App. No. 00AP-1119.

{¶6} To prove a breach of the duty by defendant to maintain the highways plaintiff must establish, by a preponderance of the evidence, that DOT had actual or constructive notice of the precise condition or defect alleged to have caused the accident. *McClellan v. ODOT* (1986), 34 Ohio App. 3d 247, 517 N.E. 2d 1388.

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|------------------------|-------|---------------------|
| Case No. 2007-06438-AD | - 3 - | MEMORANDUM DECISION |
|------------------------|-------|---------------------|

Defendant is only liable for roadway conditions of which it has notice, but fails to reasonably correct. *Bussard v. Dept. of Transp.* (1986), 31 Ohio Misc. 2d 1, 31 OBR 64, 507 N.E. 2d 1179. No evidence has shown defendant had actual notice of the damage-causing pothole.

{¶7} Therefore, to find liability plaintiff must prove DOT had constructive notice of the defect. The trier of fact is precluded from making an inference of defendant's constructive notice, unless evidence is presented in respect to the time the defective condition developed. *Spires v. Ohio Highway Department* (1988), 61 Ohio Misc. 2d 262, 577 N.E. 2d 458. There is no indication defendant had constructive notice of the pothole. Plaintiff has not produced any evidence to infer defendant, in a general sense, maintains its highways negligently or that defendant's acts caused the defective condition. *Herlihy v. Ohio Department of Transportation* (1999), 99-07011-AD. Size of the defect (pothole) is insufficient to show notice or duration of existence. *O'Neil v. Department of Transportation* (1988), 61 Ohio Misc. 2d 287, 587 N.E. 2d 891.

{¶8} For plaintiff to prevail on a claim of negligence, she must prove, by a preponderance of the evidence, that defendant owed her a duty, that it breached that duty, and that the breach proximately caused her injuries. *Armstrong v. Best Buy Company, Inc.* 99 Ohio St. 3d 79, 81, 2003-Ohio-2573, 788 N.E. 2d 1088, citing *Menifee v. Ohio Welding Products, Inc.* (1984), 15 Ohio St. 3d 75, 77, 472 N.E. 2d 707. Plaintiff has the burden of proving, by a preponderance of the evidence, that she suffered a loss and that this loss was proximately caused by defendant's negligence. *Barnum v. Ohio State University* (1977), 76-0368-AD. However, "[i]t is the duty of a party on whom the burden of proof rests to produce evidence which furnishes a reasonable basis for sustaining his claim. If the evidence so produced furnishes only a basis for a choice among different possibilities as to any issue in the case, he fails to sustain such burden." Paragraph three of the syllabus in *Steven v. Indus. Comm.* (1945), 145 Ohio St. 198, 30 O.O. 415, 61 N.E. 2d 198, approved and followed. This court, as trier of fact, determines questions of proximate causation. *Shinaver v.*

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|------------------------|-------|---------------------|
| Case No. 2007-06438-AD | - 4 - | MEMORANDUM DECISION |
|------------------------|-------|---------------------|

*Szymanski* (1984), 14 Ohio St. 3d 51, 14 OBR 446, 471 N.E. 2d 477. Defendant professed liability cannot be established when requisite notice of the damage-causing conditions cannot be proven. Generally, defendant is only liable for roadway conditions of which it has notice, but fails to correct. *Bussard v. Dept. of Transp.* (1986), 31 Ohio Misc. 2d 1, 31 OBR 64, 507 N.E. 2d 479. Notice was not established.

{¶19} In order to find liability for a damage claim occurring in a construction area, the court must look at the totality of the circumstances to determine whether DOT acted in a manner to render the highway free from an unreasonable risk of harm for the traveling public. *Feichtner v. Ohio Dept. of Transp.* (1995), 114 Ohio App. 3d 346, 683 N.E. 2d 112. In fact, the duty to render the highway free from unreasonable risk of harm is the precise duty owed by DOT to the traveling public both under normal traffic conditions and during highway construction projects. See e.g. *White v. Ohio Dept. of Transp.* (1990), 56 Ohio St. 3d 39, 564 N.E. 2d 462; *Rhodus*, 67 Ohio App. 3d at 729, 588 N.E. 2d 864; *Feichtner*, at 354. In the instant claim, plaintiff has failed to introduce sufficient evidence to prove defendant or its agents maintained a known hazardous roadway condition. Plaintiff has failed to prove that her property damage was connected to any conduct under the control of defendant, defendant was negligent in maintaining the construction area, or that there was any negligence on the part of defendant or its agents. *Taylor v. Transportation Dept.* (1998), 97-10898-AD; *Weininger v. Department of Transportation* (1999), 99-10909-AD; *Witherell v. Ohio Dept. of Transportation* (2000), 2000-04758-AD. Consequently, plaintiff's claim is denied.

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ENTRY OF ADMINISTRATIVE  
DETERMINATION

Having considered all the evidence in the claim file and, for the reasons set forth in the memorandum decision filed concurrently herewith, judgment is rendered in favor of defendant. Court costs are assessed against plaintiff.

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DANIEL R. BORCHERT  
Deputy Clerk

Entry cc:

Shelley K. Pitcher  
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James G. Beasley, Director  
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RDK/laa  
12/18  
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