

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

JAMES FORREST HAUXHURST

Plaintiff

v.

OHIO DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION, DISTRICT 12

Defendant

Case No. 2009-03941-AD

Deputy Clerk Daniel R. Borchert

MEMORANDUM DECISION

FINDINGS OF FACT

{¶ 1} On January 6, 2009, at approximately 9:00 a.m., plaintiff, James F. Hauxhurst, was traveling south on State Route 528 in Geauga County, when a preceding motorist struck a center line road reflector propelling the reflector into the path of plaintiff's 2006 Chevrolet Silverado truck. According to plaintiff, the reflector punctured the left rear tire on his truck.

{¶ 2} Plaintiff implied the damage to his truck tire was proximately caused by negligence on the part of defendant, Department of Transportation ("DOT"), in failing to maintain the roadway free of hazardous conditions such as the dislodged road reflector. Consequently, plaintiff filed this complaint seeking to recover \$200.81, the cost of a replacement tire and related repair expense. The filing fee was paid.

{¶ 3} Defendant denied any liability in this matter based on the contention that no DOT personnel had any knowledge of a loose reflector on the roadway prior to January 6, 2009. Defendant denied receiving any calls or complaints from any entity regarding a loose road reflector which DOT located "near milepost 13.40 on SR 528 in

Geauga County.” Defendant asserted plaintiff did not produce evidence to establish the length of time the reflector was on the roadway at milepost 13.40 prior to 9:00 a.m. on January 6, 2009. Defendant suggested that the reflector condition “existed in that location for only a relatively short amount of time before plaintiff’s incident.”

{¶ 4} Defendant argued plaintiff did not offer evidence to prove his property damage was caused by conduct attributable to DOT personnel. Defendant pointed out plaintiff acknowledged the reflector was dislodged by an unknown third party motorist not affiliated with DOT. Defendant contended no liability can attach to DOT for the conduct of an unknown third party. Furthermore, defendant explained DOT crews regularly maintain State Route 528 with a DOT employee performing inspection activity at the particular roadway site on December 16, 2008. Defendant stated that if any DOT “work crews were doing activities such that if there was a noticeable defect with any raised or loosened pavement markers it would have been immediately repaired.” Defendant related DOT “does not believe that it breached its duty of care to the traveling public and therefore, did not act negligently toward plaintiff.”

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

{¶ 5} Defendant has the duty to maintain its highways 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.

{¶ 6} In order to prove a breach of the duty to maintain the highways, plaintiff must prove, by a preponderance of the evidence, that defendant 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. Defendant is only liable for roadway condition 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. The trier of fact is precluded from making an inference of defendant's constructive notice, unless evidence is presented in respect to the time that the defective condition developed. *Spires v. Ohio Highway Department* (1988), 61 Ohio Misc. 2d 262, 577 N.E. 2d 458. There is no evidence that DOT had any notice of the

dislodged reflector on the roadway. However, proof of notice of a dangerous condition is not necessary when defendant's own agents actively caused such condition. See *Bello v. City of Cleveland* (1922), 106 Ohio St. 94, 138 N.E. 526, at paragraph one of the syllabus; *Sexton v. Ohio Department of Transportation* (1996), 94-13861. No evidence has been submitted to establish that the damage-causing reflector was dislodged from the roadway by defendant's personnel.

{¶ 7} For plaintiff to prevail on a claim of negligence, he must prove, by a preponderance of the evidence, that defendant owed him a duty, that it breached that duty, and that the breach proximately caused his injuries. *Armstrong v. Best Buy Company, Inc.*, 99 Ohio St. 3d 79, , 2003-Ohio-2573, 788 N.E. 2d 1088, ¶8 citing *Menifee v. Ohio Welding Products, Inc.* (1984), 15 Ohio St. 3d 75, 77, 15 OBR 79, 472 N.E. 2d 707. Plaintiff has the burden of proving, by a preponderance of the evidence, that he 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.

{¶ 8} Evidence in the instant action is conclusive to show that plaintiff's damage was caused by an act of an unidentified third party. Defendant has denied liability based on the particular premise that it had no duty to control the conduct of a third person except in cases where a special relationship exists between defendant and either plaintiff or the person whose conducts needs to be controlled. See *Federal Steel & Wire Corp. v. Ruhlin Const. Co.* (1989), 45 Ohio St. 3d 171, 543 N.E. 2d 769. However, defendant may still bear liability if it can be established if some act or omission on the part of DOT was the proximate cause of plaintiff's injury. This court, as trier of fact, determines questions of proximate causation. *Shinaver v. Szymanski* (1984), 14 Ohio St. 3d 51, 14 OBR 446, 471 N.E. 2d 477.

{¶ 9} "If an injury is the natural and probable consequence of a negligent act and it is such as should have been foreseen in the light of all the attending circumstances, the injury is then the proximate result of the negligence. It is not

necessary that the defendant should have anticipated the particular injury. It is sufficient that his act is likely to result in an injury to someone.” *Cascone v. Herb Kay Co.* (1983), 6 Ohio St. 3d 155, 160, 6 OBR 209, 451 N.E. 2d 815, quoting *Neff Lumber Co. v. First National Bank of St. Clairsville, Admr.* (1930), 122 Ohio St. 302, 309, 171 N.E. 327.

{¶ 10} Plaintiff has not shown, by a preponderance of the evidence, that defendant failed to discharge a duty owed to him or that his property damage was proximately caused by defendant’s negligence. Plaintiff has failed to show that the damage-causing reflector was connected to any conduct under the control of defendant, or that there was any negligence on the part of defendant. *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.

{¶ 11} Finally, plaintiff has not produced any evidence to infer that 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. Therefore, defendant is not liable for any damage that plaintiff may have suffered from the dislodged reflector. See *Rohrbacher v. Ohio Dept. of Transp.* (2009), 2009-03681-AD.

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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.

DANIEL R. BORCHERT
Deputy Clerk

Entry cc:

James Forrest Hauxhurst
3577 So. Ridge Road
Perry, Ohio 44081

Jolene M. Molitoris, Director
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RDK/laa
8/4
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