

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

LISA KNIGHT

Plaintiff

v.

OHIO DEPT. OF TRANSPORTATION

Defendant

Case No. 2010-03690-AD

Deputy Clerk Daniel R. Borchert

MEMORANDUM DECISION

{¶ 1} Plaintiff, Lisa Knight, filed this action against defendant, Department of Transportation (ODOT), contending her automobile was damaged as a proximate cause of negligence on the part of ODOT in maintaining a hazardous condition on Interstate 75 South in Hamilton County. Specifically, plaintiff advised that the wheel, strut, and stabilizer links on her vehicle were damaged as a result of striking a pothole in the left lane of Interstate 75. Plaintiff filed this complaint requesting damage recovery in the amount of \$467.40, the total cost of replacement parts needed resulting from the described incident. Plaintiff recalled that her property damage event occurred on February 17, 2010 at approximately 11:30 a.m. The filing fee was paid.

{¶ 2} Defendant denied liability in this matter based on the contention that no ODOT personnel had any knowledge of the particular damage-causing pothole prior to plaintiff's February 17, 2010 described occurrence. Defendant located the particular pothole "between milepost 10.88 and 9.45 on I-75 in Hamilton County" and advised that "ODOT did not receive any reports of the pothole or have knowledge of the pothole prior to the (February 17, 2010) incident." According to ODOT records the only complaint

received (December 14, 2009) regarding a pothole on Interstate 75 was in the northbound lane; the opposite direction of where plaintiff was traveling when her vehicle struck a pothole. Defendant submitted a copy of “Maintenance Records” recording ODOT maintenance activity on Interstate 75 from August 17, 2009 to February 17, 2010. The submitted document shows ODOT personnel performed pothole patching operations in the vicinity of plaintiff’s incident on September 9, 2009, January 12, 2010, and January 13, 2010. The pothole repair that was apparently made in response to the October 12, 2009 complaint is not listed on the submitted maintenance activity document.

{¶ 3} Defendant denied ODOT negligently maintained Interstate 75 in Hamilton County. Defendant noted the ODOT “Hamilton County Manager inspects all state roadways within the county at least two times a month.” Apparently no potholes were discovered between mileposts 10.88 and 9.45 on Interstate 75 South the last time that section of roadway was inspected prior to February 17, 2010. The claim file is devoid of any copy of ODOT Hamilton County inspection records. Defendant asserted the particular location of Interstate 75 is a well patrolled location and suggested the pothole plaintiff’s car struck “existed for only a short time before the incident.”

{¶ 4} 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, 2003-Ohio-2573, ¶8 citing *Menifee v. Ohio Welding Products, Inc.* (1984), 15 Ohio St. 3d 75, 77, 15 OBR 179, 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.

{¶ 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 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. There is no evidence that defendant had actual notice of the pothole. Therefore, for the court to find liability on a notice theory, evidence of constructive notice of the pothole must be presented.

{¶ 7} “[C]onstructive notice is that which the law regards as sufficient to give notice and is regarded as a substitute for actual notice or knowledge.” *In re Estate of Fahle* (1950), 90 Ohio App. 195, 197-198, 48 O.O. 231, 105 N.E. 2d 429. “A finding of constructive notice is a determination the court must make on the facts of each case not simply by applying a pre-set time standard for the discovery of certain road hazards.” *Bussard*, at 4. “Obviously, the requisite length of time sufficient to constitute constructive notice varies with each specific situation.” *Danko v. Ohio Dept. of Transp.* (Feb. 4, 1993), Franklin App. 92AP-1183. In order for there to be constructive notice, plaintiff must prove, by a preponderance of the evidence, that sufficient time has elapsed after the dangerous condition appears, so that under the circumstances defendant should have acquired knowledge of its existence. *Guiher v. Dept. of Transportation* (1978), 78-0126-AD; *Gelarden v. Ohio Dept. of Transp., Dist. 4, Ct. of Cl.* No. 2007-02521-AD, 2007-Ohio-3047.

{¶ 8} 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 pothole appeared on the roadway. *Spires v. Ohio Highway Department* (1988), 61 Ohio Misc. 2d 262, 577 N.E. 2d 458. No evidence was presented to establish the length of time that the particular pothole was present. 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. Plaintiff has failed to prove that defendant had constructive notice of the pothole. 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 roadway defect.

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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:

Lisa Knight
5713 Rutledge Trl.
Liberty Twp., Ohio 45011

RDK/laa
8/6
Filed 9/15/10
Sent to S.C. reporter 12/29/10

Jolene M. Molitoris, Director
Department of Transportation
1980 West Broad Street
Columbus, Ohio 43223