

Court of Claims of Ohio

The Ohio Judicial Center
65 South Front Street, Third Floor
Columbus, OH 43215
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ANDREW MADDUX

Plaintiff

v.

OHIO DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION, DISTRICT 8

Defendant

Case No. 2011-06854-AD

Deputy Clerk Daniel R. Borchert

MEMORANDUM DECISION

{¶1} Plaintiff, Andrew Maddux, filed this action against defendant, Department of Transportation (ODOT), contending that he suffered property damage as a proximate result of negligence on the part of ODOT in maintaining a hazardous condition on Interstate 71 northbound near Cincinnati. Plaintiff related that he was traveling on Interstate 71 northbound when he “struck a pothole in the right hand lane.” Plaintiff related that the incident damaged his front right tire and wheel. Plaintiff recalled that the described incident occurred on April 24, 2011 at approximately 9:15 p.m. Plaintiff requested damage recovery in the amount of \$469.18, the stated total cost of a replacement tire and wheel. The filing fee was paid.

{¶2} Defendant determined that plaintiff’s incident occurred at milepost 1.80 on I-71 in Hamilton County. Defendant denied liability based on the contention that no ODOT personnel had any knowledge of the particular damage-causing pothole prior to plaintiff’s April 24, 2011 incident. Defendant related that, “[t]his section of roadway has an average daily traffic count” of over 67,000 vehicles. Defendant asserted that plaintiff did not offer any evidence to establish the length of time that any pothole existed in the vicinity of milepost 1.80 on I-71 prior to his incident.

{¶3} Additionally, defendant contended that plaintiff did not offer any evidence to prove that the roadway was negligently maintained. Defendant advised that the ODOT “Hamilton County Manager conducts roadway inspections on all state roadways within the county on a routine basis, at least one to two times a month.” Apparently, no potholes were discovered in the vicinity of plaintiff’s incident the last time that section of roadway was inspected prior to April 24, 2011. Defendant argued that plaintiff has failed to offer any evidence to prove that his property damage was attributable to any conduct on the part of ODOT personnel. Defendant asserted that the roadway was “in relatively good condition at the time of plaintiff’s incident.” Defendant stated that, “[a] review of the six-month maintenance history [record submitted] for the area in question reveals that three (3) pothole patching operations were performed on I-71 near milepost 1.80.” Defendant noted, “that if ODOT personnel had detected any potholes they would have been reported and promptly scheduled for repair.”

{¶4} 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, ¶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 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. 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.

{¶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} Defendant denied receiving any complaints before April 24, 2011, regarding a pothole on Interstate 71 at milepost 1.80.

{¶7} Plaintiff did not file a response.

{¶8} 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.

{¶9} Generally, in order to recover in a suit involving damage proximately caused by roadway conditions including potholes, plaintiff must prove that either: 1) defendant had actual or constructive notice of the pothole and failed to respond in a reasonable time or responded in a negligent manner, or 2) that defendant, in a general sense, maintains its highways negligently. *Denis v. Department of Transportation* (1976), 75-0287-AD. Plaintiff has not submitted any evidence to establish that ODOT had actual notice of the pothole prior to plaintiff's incident. Therefore, in order to recover plaintiff must produce evidence to prove constructive notice of the defect or negligent maintenance.

{¶10} “[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, 47 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.

{¶11} 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.

{¶12} In order for there to be constructive notice, plaintiff must show 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. Size of the defect 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. "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. No evidence has shown that ODOT had constructive notice of the pothole.

{¶13} Plaintiff has not produced sufficient 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 plaintiff may have suffered from the pothole.

{¶14} In the instant claim, plaintiff has failed to introduce sufficient evidence to prove that defendant maintained known hazardous roadway conditions. Plaintiff failed to prove that his property damage was connected to any conduct under the control of defendant, or that defendant was negligent in maintaining the roadway area, or that there was any actionable 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. 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.

DANIEL R. BORCHERT
Deputy Clerk

Entry cc:

Andrew Maddux
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Jerry Wray, Director
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9/1
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