

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

MARK SCHWARTZBERG

Plaintiff

v.

OHIO DEPT. OF TRANSPORTATION

Defendant

Case No. 2010-10122-AD

Deputy Clerk Daniel R. Borchert

MEMORANDUM DECISION

{¶ 1} Plaintiff, Mark Schwartzberg, filed this action against defendant, Department of Transportation (ODOT), contending his vehicle was damaged as a proximate cause of negligence on the part of ODOT in maintaining a hazardous condition on Interstate 490 in Cuyahoga County. Specifically, plaintiff related his property damage occurred “[w]hile driving eastbound on I 490 ramp leading to I-77 southbound (Cleveland).” Plaintiff further related, “I drove (over) some sort of large concrete block which was in the middle of the road.” Plaintiff suggested the damage causing concrete block “may have fallen off a truck as it appeared to (be) used for sewer projects.” Plaintiff claimed the “concrete blocks” damaged the right front rim and body on his vehicle. Plaintiff recalled the described damage incident occurred on August 18, 2010 at approximately 9:50 p.m. In his complaint, plaintiff requested damages in the amount of \$2,500.00, the statutory maximum under R.C. 2743.10. The filing fee was paid.

{¶ 2} Defendant denied liability based on the contention that no ODOT personnel had any knowledge of the damage-causing debris condition prior to plaintiff’s incident. Defendant located the debris “at milepost 1.88 on I-490 in Cuyahoga County”

and advised ODOT did not receive any calls or complaints for debris at that location despite the fact the particular “section of roadway has an average daily traffic count between 25,960 and 27,160 vehicles.” Defendant suggested, “that the debris existed in that location for only a relatively short amount of time before plaintiff’s incident.” Defendant asserted plaintiff did not offer any evidence to establish the length of time the concrete debris existed on the roadway prior to 9:50 p.m. on August 18, 2010. Defendant further asserted plaintiff failed to establish the damage-causing debris condition was attributable to any conduct on the part of ODOT. Defendant noted plaintiff suggested the concrete block his vehicle struck had fallen from a truck operated by an unidentified third party. Defendant argued ODOT is generally not liable for damage caused by the acts of a third party motorist not affiliated with ODOT.

{¶ 3} Defendant pointed out that defendant’s “Cuyahoga 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 debris was discovered at milepost 1.88 on Interstate 490 the last time that specific section of roadway was inspected prior to August 18, 2010. Defendant reviewed a six-month maintenance jurisdiction history of the area in question and found thirty-five Road Cruiser Patrols were performed, the last being on August 16, 2010. Also, defendant’s records show that nine litter pick-ups were performed in the area with the last occurring on August 5, 2010 and according to defendant, any debris found would have been picked up. Defendant contended plaintiff failed to produce evidence to show his damage claimed was proximately caused by negligent maintenance on the part of ODOT.

{¶ 4} Plaintiff filed a response noted, “I did run over some type of cement block related to a sewer project.” Plaintiff revised his damage claim to \$250.00, reflecting his insurance coverage deductible for vehicle repair costs.

{¶ 5} 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.

{¶ 6} 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.

{¶ 7} 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.

{¶ 8} 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*. 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. Plaintiff has failed to produce any evidence to prove that his property damage was caused by a defective condition created by ODOT or that defendant knew about the particular debris condition prior to 9:50 p.m. on August 18, 2010.

{¶ 9} Ordinarily, to recover in any suit involving injury proximately caused by roadway conditions including debris, plaintiff must prove that either: 1) defendant had actual or constructive notice of the debris condition 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 provided any evidence to prove that ODOT had actual notice of the damage-causing condition. Therefore, in order to recover plaintiff must offer proof of defendant's constructive notice of the condition as evidence to establish 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, 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 a finding of 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.*

{¶ 11} Plaintiff has not produced any evidence to indicate the length of time that the concrete debris was present on the roadway prior to the incident forming the basis of this claim. Plaintiff has not shown that defendant had actual notice of the condition. Also, 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 concrete debris appeared on the roadway. *Spires v. Ohio Highway Department* (1988), 61 Ohio Misc. 2d 262, 577 N.E. 2d 458. There is no indication that defendant had constructive notice of the concrete debris on the roadway.

{¶ 12} Evidence in the instant action is undisputed 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 ODOT 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.

{¶ 13} “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.

{¶ 14} Evidence in the instant claim tends to show the concrete block condition was caused by an unidentified third party and not negligent maintenance on the part of ODOT. 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 or conditions. *Herlihy v. Ohio Department of Transportation* (1999), 99-07011-AD.

{¶ 15} Plaintiff has failed to prove, by a preponderance of the evidence, that defendant failed to discharge a duty owed to plaintiff, or that plaintiff's injury was proximately caused by defendant's negligence. Plaintiff failed to show that the damage-causing object at the time of the damage incident was connected to any conduct under the control of defendant or any negligence on the part of defendant proximately caused the damage. *Herman v. Ohio Dept. of Transp.* (2006), 2006-05730-AD; *Husak v. Ohio Dept. of Transp.*, Ct. of Cl. No. 2008-03963-AD, 2008-Ohio-5179.

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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:

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RDK/laa
11/24
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