

**THE CITY OF OKLAHOMA CITY
OFFICE OF
THE MUNICIPAL COUNSELOR**

Council Agenda
Item No. IX. CE
4/9/2024

TO: Mayor and City Council

FROM: Kenneth Jordan
Municipal Counselor

Resolution authorizing the Municipal Counselor to waive service of process and to confess judgment without admission of liability in the amount of \$13,776.75 and all the costs of the action in the Oklahoma County District Court in the claim filed by Russell Coats. Ward 3.

Claimant's address:
609 Hunters Hill Road
Oklahoma City, OK 73127

This office acknowledges receipt of a claim from the above-referenced claimant in which the claimant alleges personal injury and property damages on January 21, 2024, and again on February 1, 2024, when a City sewer main backed up inside the property located at 609 Hunters Hill Road in Oklahoma City. Damages are alleged in the amount of \$27,553.51. This amount is supported by documentation. After negotiation, the Municipal Counselor's Office has agreed to recommend, and the claimant has agreed to accept, \$13,776.75 as full and final settlement of all claims related to the alleged incident(s), including, but not limited to, claims for property damage and personal injury. The claimant has also agreed to install a backflow preventer.

Section 153(A) of the Governmental Tort Claims Act provides:

- A. The state or a political subdivision shall be liable for loss resulting from its torts or the torts of its employees acting within the scope of their employment subject to the limitations and exceptions specified in The Governmental Tort Claims Act and only where the state or political subdivision, if a private person or entity, would be liable for money damages under the laws of this state. The state or a political subdivision shall not be liable under the provisions of The Governmental Tort Claims Act for any act or omission of an employee acting outside the scope of the employee's employment.

51 O.S. 2023 Supp. §153(A).

According to the Oklahoma Supreme Court, a prima facie case of negligence is established by showing the following: "(1) a duty owed by the defendant to protect the plaintiff from injury, (2) a failure to properly exercise or perform that duty and (3) the plaintiff's injuries are proximately caused by the defendant's failure to exercise his duty of care." *McKellips v. Saint Francis Hospital, Inc.*, 741 P.2d 467, 470 (Okla. 1987) (citations omitted).

Proximate cause has two components - legal causation and cause in fact. *Id.* Cause in fact is determined by the "but for" test: "The defendant's conduct is a cause of the event if the event would not have occurred but for that conduct." *Id.* (citations omitted). "Proximate cause" is also a synonym for "legal cause." BLACK'S LAW DICTIONARY, 804 (6th Ed. 1990). To clarify this issue, the Oklahoma Supreme Court has further defined proximate cause: "The proximate cause of an event must be that which in a natural and continuous sequence, unbroken by an independent cause, produces the event and without which the event would not have occurred." *Gaines v. Providence Apartments*, 750 P.2d 125, 126-27 (Okla. 1987) (citations omitted).

Applicable law holds that a municipality is not liable for damages resulting from a sewer backup unless the municipality had prior notice, actual or constructive, of a nuisance or defect in the sewer line which it failed to abate within a reasonable time and such nuisance or defect resulted in damage to the claimant. *Oklahoma City v. Romano*, 433 P.2d 924, 927 (Okla. 1967).

This office is in receipt of information from the Line Maintenance Division of the Utilities Department regarding this incident. The information indicates that there were no reports of defects in the City's sewer main at or near the same location in the five years prior to the claimant's first alleged incident. The City also performed preventative maintenance at or near the same location in the five years prior to the first alleged incident. The information further indicates that there was insoluble paper in the City's main on the date of the first incident. This information further indicates that the City returned on February 3, 2024, after the second alleged incident, and cleared roots from the City's main. Although the City did not appear to have actual or constructive notice of defects in the City's sewer main at or near the same location prior to the first alleged incident, the City may have had actual or constructive notice concerning the second alleged incident.

Based on the above information and applicable Oklahoma law, it is the opinion of this office that this claim should be approved, and that the Municipal Counselor should be authorized to Confess Judgment without admission of liability in the amount of \$13,776.75, and all costs of the action in the District Court. If Council agrees, a Resolution to that effect has been prepared.

ZAW