

George Latimer
County Executive

Office of the County Attorney

John M. Nonna
County Attorney

May 20, 2021

Westchester County Board of Legislators
County of Westchester
800 Michaelian Office Building
148 Martine Avenue
White Plains, New York 10601

Re: Request for Authorization to Settle the Lawsuit of Maria Leonardo and Brian Leonardo against the County of Westchester and Westchester County Parks Department in the amount of \$100,000.00

Dear Honorable Members of the Board:

Attached for your review is proposed legislation in connection with the above-referenced matter.

In or about October 2018, plaintiffs commenced an action in the Supreme Court, Westchester County against the County of Westchester and the Westchester County Parks Department ("County") for injuries suffered by Maria Leonardo ("Leonardo") when she tripped and fell on County property on August 25, 2017. Leonardo was 50 years old at the time of her accident. The accident occurred at the Croton Point Park; a Westchester County owned, operated, and maintained facility.

At the time of her accident, Leonardo was visiting her sister at a cabin she had rented at Croton Point Park. At about 5:30 p.m. Leonardo was attempting to exit the cabin when she tripped on broken floor tile near the opened front door of the premises. When she stumbled forward she attempted to break her fall by extending her arms outward to grab onto the door frame. The door frame became loose and cause Leonardo to further stumble through the doorway and down a step onto a concrete pad outside the entrance. She landed on her right foot which caused and avulsion, non-displaced fracture to her right cuboid bone. She also suffered meniscal tears to her right knee ultimately requiring arthroscopic surgery under general anesthesia.



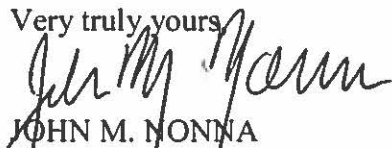
At a trial, Leonardo will argue that she suffered a permanent injury to her right ankle and knee as a result of this accident. Leonardo will also argue that the defective condition of both the tile flooring and the loosened door frame combined to create the accident. Finally, Leonardo will argue that the single step at the entrance to the front door of the cabin was not in compliance with Residential Code of New York State by being of an unsafe height greater than required by the aforementioned code by at least an inch.

County personnel responsible at Croton Point Park have testified that there are no formal inspections conducted at the rental cabins other than a general walk through at the end of each rental season. Further, it was discovered that erosion under the cabin structure resulted in loss of support under the front door which caused the door frame to become loose and unsecured. The erosion also caused the concrete pad outside the front door to sink creating a step higher than permitted by code.

The County did file a motion for summary judgment arguing that the tile defect was de minimus and non-actionable, and that the loose/unsecured door frame was the result of a latent defect that could not have been discovered upon any inspection. However, the Court denied the County's motion.

Plaintiffs' initial demand to settle was \$275,000. After extensive negotiations, the parties eventually settled all claims for the amount of \$100,000.00.

Therefore, I am requesting that this Board approve the accompanying Act authorizing the settlement of all claims of plaintiff's damages, past and future, by payment in the amount of \$100,000.00, inclusive of counsel fees. Plaintiff's counsel has indicated that such an amount would be acceptable to plaintiff.

Very truly yours,

JOHN M. NONNA
Westchester County Attorney

JMN/jf
Enclosure

BOARD OF LEGISLATORS
COUNTY OF WESTCHESTER

Your Committee is in receipt of a proposed Act which, if enacted by your Board, would authorize the settlement of the lawsuit of Maria Leonardo and Brian Leonardo against the County of Westchester and Westchester County Parks Department, in an amount not to exceed \$100,000.00.

Plaintiff Maria Leonardo (“plaintiff”) alleges that on August 25, 2017, she suffered physical injuries when she tripped and fell while exiting a cabin owned and maintained by the County located at Croton Point Park. Plaintiff alleges defective conditions of the cabin flooring and structure resulted in this accident and her injuries.

At a trial, plaintiff, 50 years old at the time of the accident, will argue that she suffered a permanent injury to her right ankle and knee which required surgeries and a permanent loss of function. Under these factual circumstances, the court or jury would likely find in plaintiff’s favor on the issue of liability.

Your Committee has carefully considered the subject matter, the settlement proposal, and the attached Act and recommends authorizing the County Attorney or his designee to settle this

ACT NO.

2021

AN ACT authorizing the County Attorney to settle the lawsuit of Maria Leonardo and Bryan Leonardo against the County of Westchester and Westchester County Parks Department, Supreme Court of the State of New York, Westchester County, Index No. 67133/2018

BE IT ENACTED by the County Board of Legislators of the County of Westchester as follows:

Section 1. The County Attorney is hereby authorized to settle the lawsuit of Maria Leonardo and Brian Leonardo against the County of Westchester and Westchester County Parks Department by payment in an amount not to exceed \$100,000.00 to plaintiff, inclusive of counsel fees.

Section 2. The County Attorney or his designee is hereby authorized to execute and deliver all documents and take such actions as the County Attorney deems necessary or desirable to accomplish the purposes hereof.

Section 3. This Act shall take effect immediately.

FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

SUBJECT: Lawsuit Settlement: Leonardo, M NO FISCAL IMPACT PROJECTED

OPERATING BUDGET IMPACT

To Be Completed by Submitting Department and Reviewed by Budget

SECTION A - FUND

GENERAL FUND AIRPORT FUND SPECIAL DISTRICTS FUND

SECTION B - EXPENSES AND REVENUES

Total Current Year Expense \$ 100,000

Total Current Year Revenue \$ -

Source of Funds (check one): Current Appropriations Transfer of Existing Appropriations

Additional Appropriations Other (explain)

Identify Accounts: 6N Fund: 615 59 0697/4110 4280/04

Potential Related Operating Budget Expenses: Annual Amount N/A

Describe: Settlement of General Liability Claim (Maria and Bryan Leonardo G170172)

Potential Related Operating Budget Revenues: Annual Amount N/A

Describe: _____

Anticipated Savings to County and/or Impact on Department Operations:

Current Year: N/A

Next Four Years: N/A

Prepared by: John A. Fico

Title: Senior Assistant County Attorney

Department: Law

Date: May 12, 2021

Reviewed By: 

Budget Director 

Date: 5/20/21

To commence the statutory time for appeals as of right (CPLR 5513[a]), you are advised to serve a copy of this order, with notice of entry, upon all parties.

SUPREME COURT OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK
COUNTY OF WESTCHESTER

-----X
MARIA LEONARDO and BRYAN LEONARDO,

Plaintiffs,

Index No. 67133/2018
DECISION and ORDER
Motion Sequence No. 1

-against-

COUNTY OF WESTCHESTER and WESTCHESTER
COUNTY PARKS DEPARTMENT,

Defendants.

-----X
RUDERMAN, J.

The following papers were considered on the motion by defendants County of Westchester and Westchester County Parks Department for an order pursuant to CPLR 3212 granting them summary judgment dismissing the complaint:

<u>Papers</u>	<u>Numbered</u>
Notice of Motion, Affirmation, Exhibits A – G, Affidavit, and Memorandum of Law	1
Affirmation in Opposition, Memorandum of Law, Affidavit, Exhibits 1 – 5	2
Reply Affirmation	3

In this personal injury action, plaintiff Maria Leonardo¹ alleges that she was injured on August 25, 2017 in a trip-and-fall accident in the doorway of a rental cabin in Croton Point Park. She alleges that first her foot caught on a broken floor tile while exiting the cabin, then, when she placed her hands on the door frame to catch herself, the door frame shifted, causing her to misstep, and resulting in injury. Plaintiffs served a Notice of Claim dated November 10, 2017, and commenced this action by filing a summons and complaint on October 12, 2018. A trial

¹ The claims of plaintiff Bryan Leonardo are solely derivative in nature, and references to “plaintiff” in the singular will refer to plaintiff Maria Leonardo.

readiness order was filed by the Court on August 10, 2020, and a note of issue was filed on August 13, 2020.

In the present motion, filed on September 24, 2020, defendants argue that one of the defective conditions claimed by plaintiff, as described at her deposition and as depicted in the photographs defendants submit, is a missing piece of a broken floor tile, which they contend created only a de minimis height differential and as such is non-actionable. They contend that the other claimed defect, the shifting door frame, was a latent condition of which they had no notice. They submit an affidavit of Phil Manuli, who was the Park's foreman and acting superintendent on the date of plaintiff's accident. Manuli states that he conducted an inspection of the cabins prior to the beginning of the rental season of 2017, which runs from May 1st to October 31st, and that he would have repaired any defective and/or dangerous condition he found. In addition, he states that there were no complaints about the condition of the subject cabin from other renters during the 2017 season prior to plaintiff's visit. He explains that after plaintiff's accident an inspection of the subject cabin was made and it was discovered that erosion around the front entrance occurred which may have caused the door frame to shift slightly, but that assuming the condition contributed to loosening the door frame, it was not noticeable prior to plaintiff's accident, and it cannot be determined when the condition developed. According to Manuli, the door frame condition was not present during the inspection of the cabin prior to the 2017 rental season. Finally, Manuli characterizes the broken tile as creating only a 1/8" height differential.

In opposition, plaintiffs submit, inter alia, video recordings showing the condition of the cabin's door frame on the date of the accident, in one of which it is demonstrated that the frame

has pulled away from the cabin wall and can be moved approximately an inch, the other which shows that the bottom of the door frame, containing the saddle of the door's threshold, can be tilted away from the wall and shifted up and down. Plaintiffs also submit photographs showing the saddle of the door frame raised up from the floor, and that the step down from the cabin floor to the landing outside was approximately 12 inches.

Discussion

Summary judgment is a drastic remedy that should be granted only if no triable issues of fact exist and the movant is entitled to judgment as a matter of law (*see Rotuba Extruders, Inc. v Ceppos*, 46 NY2d 223 [1978]). The court's task on a motion for summary judgment is issue finding rather than issue determination (*see Sillman v Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp.*, 3 NY2d 395, 404 [1957]), and it must view the evidence in the light most favorable to the party opposing the motion (*see Gardella v Remizov*, 144 AD3d 977, 979 [2d Dept 2016]). If the movant presents a prima facie showing of its entitlement to judgment as a matter of law (*see Alvarez v Prospect Hosp.*, 68 NY2d 320, 324 [1986]), the burden shifts to the party opposing the motion to produce competent evidence demonstrating the existence of triable issues of fact (*see Zuckerman v City of New York*, 49 NY2d 557, 562 [1980]).

Defendants' submissions on this motion fail to establish their right to dismissal of the complaint. The portions of plaintiff's deposition and hearing testimony on which they rely do not establish that the defect on which she claims to have caught her foot was non-actionable as a matter of law; whether a dangerous or defective condition exists so as to create liability is not solely a function of its depth, but rather, "depends on the peculiar facts and circumstances of each case and is generally a question of fact for the jury" (*Trincere v County of Suffolk*, 90 NY2d

976, 977 [1997]). Nor do the poor-quality photographs provided as exhibits make such a definitive showing. The assertion by Manuli that the missing piece of broken tile created a height differential of only 1/8" does not establish defendants' non-liability as a matter of law, since the photograph of the floor near the doorway does not establish that the height differential between the tile and the subflooring beneath is the only characteristic of the defect. The characterization of the floor defect as "open and obvious" does not establish a right to relief, because "[p]roof that a dangerous condition is open and obvious does not preclude a finding of liability against an owner for failure to maintain property in a safe condition" (*Holmes v Macy's Retail Holdings, Inc.*, 184 AD3d 811, 811 [2d Dept 2020], citing *Gradwohl v Stop & Shop Supermarket Co., LLC*, 70 AD3d 634, 635-636 [2d Dept 2010] and *Cupo v Karfunkel*, 1 AD3d 48, 52 [2d Dept 2003]).

Manuli's claim that the "eroded" condition of the door frame was not known to him up to the time of plaintiff's accident, merely establishes that he did not have actual notice of the condition. There still remains a question of whether he should have known of it by the time of plaintiff's accident.

Moreover, even assuming that defendants' submissions establish their claims that the spot on the floor with the missing piece of broken tile constitutes a de minimis defect, and that they had no actual or constructive notice of the condition of the door frame, plaintiffs' submissions in opposition create questions of fact that preclude summary judgment. The condition of the floor near the threshold, as depicted in plaintiffs' submissions, creates questions of fact as to whether the condition on which plaintiff's foot got caught was an actionable defect. Similarly, the video footage and plaintiffs' photographs show significant damage to the door frame and the manner in

which it was secured to the cabin, creating questions of fact as to whether appropriate inspection would have disclosed the defect.

Nor have defendants established grounds to reject the aspect of plaintiffs' claim asserting that the step from the cabin threshold to the ground below was steeper than allowed by regulation. Not only did plaintiffs' bill of particulars state in paragraph 11 that "[t]he subject step is in violation of 19 NYCRR 1220, Section R311"; in paragraph 6 it also described the alleged problem with the step, stating that defendants had "creat[ed] and/or allow[ed] a dangerous and unsafe condition by constructing and/or allowing the step leading to the outside to be of an unsafe height greater than required by applicable laws and regulations." Therefore, plaintiffs' current, slightly more specific citation to 19 NYCRR § 1220.2 and RCNYS [Residential Code of New York State] R311.3.1, which directs that the floor or landing on the exterior side of a required egress door "shall not be more than 8 ¼ inches below the top of the threshold." neither raises a new claim, nor causes any prejudice to defendants. Finally, plaintiffs' failure to offer expert testimony to establish this claimed regulatory violation does not entitle defendants to any relief here. Since defendants did not make a prima facie showing of a right to dismissal of this aspect of plaintiffs' claims, plaintiffs had no burden of coming forward with expert testimony supporting it.

Based on the foregoing, it is hereby

ORDERED that defendants' motion for summary judgment dismissing the complaint is denied; and it is further

ORDERED that the parties are directed to appear in the Settlement Conference Part of the Supreme Court, Westchester County on a date and in a manner of which they will be notified by that Part.

This constitutes the Decision and Order of the Court.

Dated: White Plains, New York
January 4, 2021


HON. TERRY JANE RUDERMAN, J.S.C.