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Oldham PVA cleared in suit filed by former employees

By John Foster

A two-year lawsuit requesting removal of Oldham County's property valuation administrator from his post has come to an end.

Plaintiffs Wanda and the late Charlie Woolum claimed PVA Ron Winters acted unethically in his office and under-assessed properties for personal and political gain.

Oldham Circuit Court Judge Karen Conrad ruled Nov. 12 in Winters' favor on the final two claims. She dismissed 19 claims in Oct. 2007. She also awarded legal costs to Winters.

In the ruling she wrote, "It can hardly be said that the defendant should be removed from his office for malfeasance or willful neglect in the discharge of his official duties."

Charlie Woolum served as Winters' chief deputy and Wanda Woolum served as PVA office manager until June 2006. Charlie Woolum ran against Winters in the 2006 heated republican primary with negative ads coming from both candidates. Winters won the nomination.

He terminated the Woolums and their daughter's employment June 30.

"Their services were no longer needed," he said. "You can read between the lines."

They filed the lawsuit in August, before Woolum filed to run as a write-in candidate during the general election, an election he also lost.

"My contention all along is it is nothing but a political lawsuit," Winters said, meant to embarrass Winters and gain votes for Woolum.

Wanda Woolum said the lawsuit wasn't political.

"We didn't like what was going on at the office, so we filed a lawsuit," she said. The political thing was to fire her whole family without a reason, in her mind.

The suit claimed among other things that Winters used the PVA vehicle for personal use without proper documentation, that he took petty cash for his own use, that he used the office computer for his re-election campaign, and that he created "an atmosphere of fear" within the office.

Conrad dismissed those claims in Oct. 2007, according to court documents. Charles Woolum died Nov. 11, 2007.

Two other claims went to trial Sept. 23 and 29. The Woolums claimed Winters chronically under-assessed properties throughout the county and that he granted agricultural discounts to his friends for political gain, either of which he could be removed from office for.

Woolum's lawyer presented five properties, claiming they were under-assessed based on their later sale price or sales prices of surrounding properties. Winter's lawyer showed audits from the state of 80 randomly selected properties over two years comparing their assessed value to their sale value. Winters was consistently within 5 percent.

Thomas Crawford, director of local evaluation wrote in a letter submitted as evidence that Winters ranks in the top portion of PVAs in the state and does a better job than most at accurately assessing properties.

Conrad wrote in her ruling that five samples does not demonstrate a widespread, continuing pattern.

As for the agricultural exemption, Woolum pointed to two friends of Winters — Gary Hardy and Dennis Pollard — who received agricultural discounts on pieces of land she doesn't believe qualify.

"Well, yeah they're friends of mine," Winters said, noting that he grants an exemption to anyone — friend or stranger — who meets the criteria for an exemption. "If you qualify, you get it."

Hardy received the exemption — which allows property 10 acres or more to be assessed at an agricultural rate of either \$500 or \$1,000 an acre instead of the much higher property values for residential land in Oldham County — before he divided the land into 10 lots, according to court documents.

Sheila Robinson, branch supervisor for the Kentucky Department of Revenue, said it doesn't matter if the land is divided, as long as it is contiguous and used for agricultural purposes. Hardy testified in the trial that he mows and sells hay off the land.

Pollard contracts with farmers to let cattle graze there or to grow hay, according to receipts he presented to the court.

It's a good business decision, Winters said, that allows Pollard to legitimately receive the agricultural discount.

Woolum said she doesn't like Conrad's decision in Winters' favor, but she's willing to live with it.

"I still think I did the right thing," she said. She still thinks Winters actions as PVA are unethical.

Winters said he is "tickled to death" to finally have his name cleared and the lawsuit over after more than two years.

"Even if you know you're innocent, it's hanging over your head," he said.

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