

Federal judge in Tacoma blocks release of strip club dancers' licenses

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The News Tribune

October 23, 2014 Updated 20 hours ago



David Van Vleet talks to the media at the federal courthouse in Tacoma Thursday.

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A federal judge in Tacoma on Thursday blocked the release of business licenses for dancers and managers at a Parkland strip club, saying the workers would “likely suffer irreparable harm” if the information is disclosed.

A Pierce County man who requested the licenses under the state’s Public Records Act said he requested the information because he was curious and he wants to pray for the strippers.

“I would pray for those dancers by name,” David Van Vleet said after the hearing. “I’m a Christian. ... We have a right to pray for people.”

Van Vleet said he also was trying to protect the public’s rights.

“I was trying to do something for the public good because that’s why we have the record law,” Van Vleet said.

But U.S. District Court Judge Ronald Leighton issued a preliminary injunction prohibiting disclosure of licenses for about 70 dancers and managers at DreamGirls at Fox’s in Parkland.

Jenn Kaplan, an attorney for Fox’s, argued release of the licenses would violate the workers’ First Amendment and privacy rights. The licenses include stage and legal names, dates of birth, signatures, photos, height, weight and eye color.

Kaplan reiterated the concerns of a female manager and dancer — identified as plaintiffs Jane Roe 1 and 2 in the complaint — that their safety would be jeopardized if their licenses were released. Their concerns included harassment by Van Vleet or others.

The case pits Washington state’s Public Records Act against free speech and privacy protections laid out in the U.S. Constitution.

Van Vleet said he is a civil engineer, a parent and a Pierce County citizen who frequently files public records requests. He lists an Auburn post office box as his address.

Standing at a lectern, he argued his case to Leighton for 20 minutes.

The judge asked him if he understood why the women didn’t want him to have their license information.

Van Vleet said he did, but that he is protected by the same Constitution they are.

Leighton also asked Van Vleet why he wanted the information.

Besides being curious and praying for the workers, Van Vleet said he was entitled to the licenses under the state’s Public Records Act.

“I’m not going to harm them,” Van Vleet said.

Leighton countered: “You could leave their files at a coffee shop inadvertently.”

Van Vleet told the judge he wouldn’t release the information to harm anyone.

He said the workers should have known their licenses could be disclosed under state law.

Without a court order, Pierce County Auditor Julie Anderson said last week she would release the licenses to comply with the records act. Lawyers for the county did not support or oppose the preliminary injunction. Anderson and Pierce County were named as defendants along with Van Vleet in Fox’s complaint.

Both sides agree that no provisions of the state Public Records Act prevent the documents from being released to the public.

Citing the interests of both the workers and the public, Leighton granted a preliminary injunction barring release of the licenses. But the judge said he had concerns about the breadth of Fox’s request that the licenses be prohibited from release to anyone.

The judge said the issues at stake were serious and needed to be resolved.

At Fox’s request, Leighton had previously granted a two-week temporary restraining order that was due to expire Oct. 29.

A decision on a final injunction and its breadth will be addressed at the next hearing Dec. 15.

Van Vleet described Leighton’s ruling Thursday as “chilling.”

“He essentially silenced seven million people in the state of Washington,” Van Vleet said.

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