

Former court admin “proud” of settlement

By Brionna Friedrich
The Daily World

After a 12 1/2 hour mediation session Tuesday, Aberdeen settled a nearly two-year long sexual harassment suit against its Municipal Court judge.

In agreeing to pay former court administrator Aminta Hill \$580,000, neither the city nor judge Paul Conroy admit any wrongdoing, but all parties have agreed not to pursue any further action.

Hill's attorneys, Victoria Vreeland and Erik Kupka, issued a brief statement on the settlement Thursday night.

“We have been very proud to represent Ms. Hill in bringing her claims of discrimination and retaliation against Paul Conroy, the municipal court judge, and the City of Aberdeen. She made a difficult decision to bring suit to enforce our state laws prohibiting sexual harassment and discrimination. But, those laws are meaningless unless people take action.

“Ms. Hill is also proud that the justice system works. She pursued her claims which resulted in a substantial settlement. And, although the defendants, as is common, do not admit wrongdoing, that kind of a settlement is a clear sign that her claims are valid and her testimony is credible.”

In her suit, Hill said Conroy professed his “love” for her in October 2010, undermining their working relationship when she repeatedly declined his advances. She alleged he became hostile, overly critical and went out of his way to get her alone. She said she felt threatened and eventually left her job.

The city hired an independent investigator to evaluate her complaints, and a report was issued in January 2011 concluding Conroy likely minimized and Hill exaggerated to some degree the seriousness of their situation. It did not find her claims that Conroy was following her “credible.”

“Conroy attempted to reassure Hill that her employment was secure and would not be affected if she rejected his advances,” the report stated. “While well-intentioned, his remarks were foolish and clumsy and Hill, not unreasonably, believed that Conroy linked her reaction to his invitation to her employment status.”

Hill filed her lawsuit in August 2011.

The settlement will be paid out of the city’s insurance pool through Washington Cities Insurance Authority, and City Attorney Eric Nelson said he doesn’t expect it to affect the city’s future premiums.

Nelson explained the city has been paying into a large pool for a long time without having to draw out of it.

“We pulled out one bucket, and they’re not going to miss that one bucket,” Nelson said. “I don’t expect our rates to change dramatically because of this, or even noticeably.”

Conroy lamented the lost opportunity to defend himself publicly, but said closing the case was positive.

“I’m glad it’s over. I strongly disagree with the plaintiff’s claims. I would have liked to have had a chance to present the actual facts at trial. The insurance authority settled the case for financial reasons, based on increasing costs and attorneys’ fees as the case went on. I did not admit doing anything wrong.”

Nelson said the fees for defending Conroy and the city have topped \$100,000, and if things didn’t go their way at trial, paying for both sides’ attorneys could easily have surpassed the cost of the settlement, aside from any damages awarded.

“This is the type of case where if the defendant receives one dollar in damages ... then the plaintiffs recover all their attorneys’ fees,” he said.

Under the settlement agreement, Hill will pay her attorneys’ fees out of that money. Vreeland said that amount is confidential.