

Former police employees file lawsuit against city

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By Jay Meisel

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PORT ST. LUCIE - The restructuring of the Port St. Lucie Police Department has compromised public safety and violated the city's charter and the civil rights of employees who lost their jobs, a lawsuit filed last week contends.

But city officials said in response the claims are false and the restructuring was in the best interests of the city.

The lawsuit was filed in the 19th Judicial District Circuit Court against city manager Greg Oravec and the city by Gary L. Robinson and Scott Bartal, former Port St. Lucie Police Department majors, Don Kryak and Steven M. Claus Sr., former captains and two other former employees, Sheila K. Bronger and Sheila B. O'Sullivan.

In April, city manager Greg Oravec announced the restructuring resulting in the layoffs of 13 employees and eliminating the ranks of captain and major. It included the appointment of two acting assistant chiefs of police.

Mr. Oravec said the restructuring would result in 18 more police officers on the streets.

But the lawsuit contends the restructuring put the city at risk by firing employees with a collective 200 years experience in law enforcement and the loss of an officer with security clearance to deal with the FBI and U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

In a letter to the city, attorneys Lorenzo Williams and **Stuart M. Address**, both of Stuart, said Mr. Robinson was the only employee "with the requisite security to receive necessary briefings from the FBI.

"Thus, in the event of any suspected terrorist or other critical activity within the city, there is no current employee within the Port St. Lucie Police Department with the necessary security clearance to receive the necessary intelligence," they added.

They also wrote the "decision of the city manager was ill advised at best and downright dangerous at worst."

But in a written response, city attorney Roger G. Orr wrote that claim is false.

He said Acting Lt. Michael Beath holds the proper security clearance with the FBI as the city's

homeland security officer.

Lt. Beath wrote in a memo May 1 that he had previously been the homeland security officer and had proper clearance.

"It had always been the policy of the Port St. Lucie Police Department to participate in Homeland Security investigations and operations with federal, state and local agencies," he said. "We have always fulfilled this obligation and will continue to in the future. At no time were the citizens of Port St. Lucie at risk of a domestic security breach due to a failure of sensitive communication."

But, Mr. Williams said, that Mr. Robinson had a higher level of security clearance than Lt. Beath.

He said Mr. Robinson had clearance to receive ongoing intelligence from the federal government, Lt. Beath only had clearance in the event of an imminent threat.

"You don't want to wait until the threat becomes imminent," he said. "You want to be on the cutting edge."

The lawsuit also contends the city called the firing officers a reduction in force, although the number of employees at the police department remained the same.

So far, the lawsuit says, the city has made no attempt to hire additional officers for street patrol.

The lawsuit also questions Mr. Oravec's statement that he made the decision to restructure on his own and political interference from the city council did not occur.

The lawsuit alleges Mr. Oravec consulted with council members and that violated the state's Sunshine law, which deals with public meetings.

But the city has maintained that did not occur.

Mr. Orr said in his letter that over the years, numerous changes were made to the police department.

"In no instance did such recasting alter the fundamentals of the services provided by the department," he said.

He also said the restructuring is "consistent with the city charter and the city manager's duties to supervise the city's employees and departments."

But Mr. Williams said the charter clearly requires an ordinance to do such a restructuring, and no ordinance has been proposed so far.

"There's nothing complicated about the language in that charter," Mr. Williams said.

Mr. Oravec did not comment on the lawsuit, but said in a prepared statement that, "In the end, when the dust clears, I am confident that the community and anyone deciding the case will know, as I know, that though it (the restructuring) was a tough decision, it was a proper decision and done in accordance with all applicable law, especially the charter."

Additional Information:

Robinson et als. v. City of Port Saint Lucie and Oravec
Nineteenth Judicial Circuit, Saint Lucie County, Florida

Co-Counsel for Plaintiffs:

Lorenzo Williams, Esq., Gary, Williams et als.

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