

County loses McCoy trial, must pay \$48,000

Jury agrees county commissioner created a hostile working environment

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Posted - Thursday, October 02, 2008 10:29 AM EDT

The dust was settling Thursday following Monroe County's loss in federal court Wednesday in a case alleging sexual harassment by Commissioner Sonny McCoy.

Hours after McCoy testified that he didn't think he did anything to sexually offend former aide Celeste Bruno, the jury found the county liable for allowing a hostile work environment and awarded Bruno \$38,000 in lost wages and \$10,000 for emotional distress.

The verdict came after Bruno attorney William Amlong grilled McCoy about telling stories to Bruno about his sexual exploits in Paris and of partially naked women aboard the boat he used to water ski to Cuba 30 years ago.

Pressed by Amlong, McCoy said, "OK, I apologize," for the story about the women on the boat.

Chief Assistant County Attorney Bob Shillinger says he sees the decision as "kind of a split verdict."

While he's thankful for the relatively low amount of the award, he recognizes that the jury did punish the county for allowing McCoy's behavior.

A decision on an appeal has not been made. Shillinger says he and his staff are analyzing the verdict and will read over the trial transcripts to see if there are any grounds worth appealing.

Throughout his testimony, McCoy repeatedly denied using sexually offensive language with or making sexual advances to Bruno, saying he must have been misunderstood.

But Bruno said much of the content contained in his stories was incredibly raw, and that she was traumatized by working for the commissioner.

Tuesday, she didn't mince words in her testimony: "You're damn right I want revenge. My life was destroyed. Did I want [McCoy] to suffer in the same way? Yes."

Bruno sued the county -- not McCoy -- in November, alleging McCoy created a hostile work environment by sexually harassing her during the 13 months she worked for him in 2005 and 2006.

Wednesday, attorney questions and McCoy's testimony focused in large part on stories about the trip to Paris he took in college and his famed water-ski trip from Key West to Cuba 30 years ago.

McCoy said he and Bruno often discussed travel and one of the stories he told was about an older dancer he met in Paris who "adopted" him. He learned about sex from that dancer, he testified. But upon returning to New York, he said, he had to visit a urologist because he "had a concern about a disease."

Bruno alleges he used the words "runny penis" in describing his problem.

Under cross-examination, Amlong asked McCoy, an architect, why he would include such graphic detail in his story, especially considering that he could have gone on and on about the beautiful architecture of such things as Notre Dame and the Eiffel Tower.

"Why did you have to tell Ms. Bruno you had an issue with your penis?" Amlong asked.

"I don't think I phrased it like that," McCoy said.

Amlong pressed the issue, and inquired if the reason he needed to go to a urologist was "overuse" of his sexual organ.

"There was a going-away party for me, that's correct," McCoy said.

McCoy added, "I don't think I used that phrase too often." Amlong responded, "How often is too often?" McCoy said, "I don't know."

The trip to Cuba in 1978 still stands as a one-of-a-kind feat, but it's the story McCoy tells about it that Bruno found offensive.

McCoy said he didn't have a watch on while he water skied, so the way he knew how long he'd been skiing was by how many women on the tow boat took off their tops. One woman, one hour. Two women, two hours. And so forth.

McCoy said he didn't think that part of the story is a big deal, saying it was the talk of Duval Street.

"Duval Street is not an office, is it,?" Amlong asked.

"OK, I apologize," McCoy said.

Under questioning from defense attorney Michael Burke asking if the story included Cuban prostitutes, McCoy said, "I remember nothing like that."

Also under questioning from Burke, McCoy vehemently denied saying anything offensive to Bruno -- whom he praised as an excellent staffer. In fact, in three performance reviews he did, he gave Bruno the highest marks possible.

"She exceeded in just about everything," he testified.

Asked how they got along, he said, "From my perspective? Fantastic." He testified the relationship was so good that Bruno would often go to parties at his daughter MiMi's house, across the street from his.

Asked if Bruno ever told him to stop talking as he got into the details of his travel stories, he said, "Unequivocally no... Cease, desist, stop... Nothing of that nature, unequivocally."

He also testified he told Bruno he thought she was cute because "if I didn't, I would have been remiss, because she is."

"She had a self-esteem problem and I tried to do everything I could to make her feel good about herself," he said.

McCoy said he was at a loss for words when Bruno quit on a Wednesday afternoon in March 2006 -- just months after she gave him a framed 500-year-old "Don Quixote" manuscript from Spain.

"She knew Don Quixote was my hero," McCoy said.