

McCoy: I'm innocent

Even with verdict finding the county liable, commissioner denies sexually harassing aide

By Cammy Clark and Larry Kahn

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When Sonny McCoy ends his term as a Monroe County commissioner Nov. 18, he'll leave his constituents with a big parting bill: Not only \$48,400 a jury awarded to a former aide of his, but likely \$100,000 or more in attorney's fees.

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

Even though he apologized on the witness stand for an instance of inappropriate language and admitted he wrote Bruno an apology letter, McCoy still insists he did nothing wrong.

"I'm surprised by the verdict," McCoy said. "I did nothing wrong. I gave her the highest grades. Treated her with the highest deference. I refute what she claimed.

"Of course this is terrible for me. I'm born and raised here. I have kids and grandkids and cousins and friends here. This hurts."

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 not doing anything to stem 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.

He says the immediate battle will focus on how much the county will have to pay Bruno's attorneys. He said that in a case such as this, attorneys are not paid a percentage of the award but a set amount, which is to be decided.

The jury's verdict came just hours 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.

Bruno, 41, claimed in her suit that McCoy, 80, sexually harassed her when he was the county's mayor in 2005 and 2006. McCoy was voted out of his commission seat three weeks ago.

Leaving office in such a manner is a huge comedown for McCoy, an eight-year commissioner who also served 10 years as Key West mayor.

Patrice Dilorenzo, another Bruno attorney, said she believes the jury decided on the \$10,400 figure for compensatory damages based on testimony by an expert witness on sexual harassment, who said Bruno would need at least two years of weekly therapy to recover from the ordeal.

Bruno said that when she was assigned to McCoy in 2005, Assistant County Administrator Debbie Frederick warned her of McCoy's penchant for sexual talk. Frederick denies that.

McCoy said he and Bruno often discussed travel and that comments Bruno found offensive were merely small parts of the larger stories.

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.

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