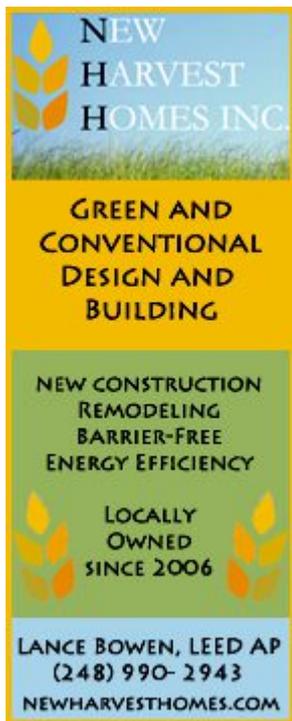


Former Pleasant Ridge Commission Candidate Sues Over Alleged Lawn Sign Thefts

(Crystal A. Proxmire, Aug. 4, 2014)

A lawn-sign stealing scandal has led to a \$10,000 (approx.) lawsuit in Pleasant Ridge. The civil matter came about after Ryan Stearn, a candidate for City Commissioner in the Nov. 5, 2013 general election, took hidden-camera photos of people he says are removing or attempting to remove his election signs that were placed at the corner of 10 Mile and Woodward.

With permission from the business owner, Stearn placed his political signs at MultiBank



Securities. But the signs kept coming up missing. According to court documents, 50 signs were stolen in total from that location.

In an Oct. 27, 2013 police report, Officer Reid states that Stearn approached him while on patrol to make a report. "Stearn told me that the signs were being stolen so frequently that he has resorted to tying the signs to the bushes with metal and rope (which at times were cut with wire cutters). He said he even Vaselined some signs to make a mess of the person stealing them."

According to the report, Stearn started looking in dumpsters along Woodward and found five of his signs in the Comerica dumpster on Oct. 27. Campaign sign costs can range, generally between \$3 and \$7 per sign.

Stearn then set up a hidden camera in tree near the signs. The camera was a motion-activated hunting camera designed to snap photos of deer and game animals. Four photos were turned in showing people attempting to remove or removing the signs. The photos were turned in on Nov. 4 and the camera was reported



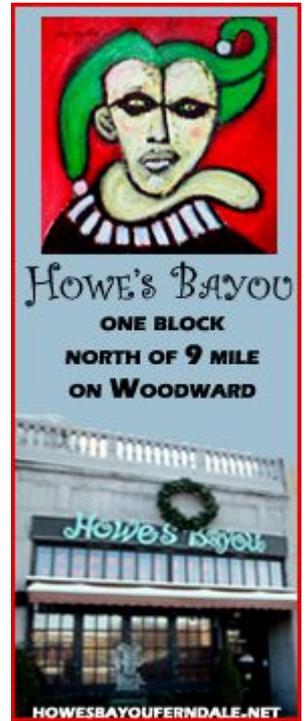
stolen on Nov. 6.

One woman in the photos is shown holding multiple campaign signs. Her identity remains unknown. Other photos show Pleasant Ridge Residents Catherine Hilker and Russ Stabile, who later admitted they were there, but said they did not steal the sign because it was tied to the bushes.

Pleasant Ridge Police called in the Oakland County Sheriff's Department to investigate. Lt. Miller of the Special Investigations Unit spoke with Hilker and showed her the photo. "I asked her why she would remove the signs from where they were placed. She said that she did not know that Stearn had permission to have the signs posted there and was not aware that it was private property," he wrote. "She said she could not remove it because it was tethered to the bush." An interview with Stabile came up with the same response.

The Sheriff's Department declined charging either with any crimes. "Due to the inability to prove subject Catherine Hilker actually stole political candidate Ryan Stearn's campaign sign(s) the above investigation is closed," Lt. Miller wrote.

Despite no charges being filed, Stearn decided to pursue the matter in the 45B District Court, suing both Hilker and Stabile for an amount up to \$10,000. Stearn, who is an attorney with Serlin, Trivax & Stearn, is asking for damages plus emotional distress. His law firm partner David Trivax is representing him. "Defendants know, or should have known that their intermeddling would, with substantial certainty, result in substantial damages to the plaintiff including, but not limited to, depriving the plaintiff of the use of the



'subject property' and... causing the plaintiff severe emotional

distress, mental anguish, shock, embarrassment, and mortification,” the suit states. The sum of “less than \$10,000” is in addition to “consequential damages, exemplary damages, treble damages, costs, interest and attorney fees.” It also states that “as a result of the foregoing, plaintiff spent countless hours monitoring and replacing his campaign signs.”

Hilker and Staible have each retained legal counsel, and counter-sued to help cover the thousands of dollars in attorney’s fees they are accruing. They are also claiming that Stearn is using the legal system to harass them. Court documents also show that Staible has claimed to have been a Stearn supporter prior to this incident, and voted for him in two previous races.

Stearn did not win the election. Bret Scott received 747 votes and J. Foreman got 718 votes, making them the two selected officials. Stearn received 646.

Attorneys from both sides have declined speaking on the record about the case because the litigation is pending. The next court date is set for Aug. 20, with Judge David M. Gubow encouraging the parties to attempt a settlement in lieu of a trial.

Keep up with the latest election coverage at <http://oaklandcounty115.com/category/election-information/>.

Check out a previous story about election sign theft at <http://oaklandcounty115.com/2011/11/04/things-get-sticky-for-election-sign-thieves/>.





UNKNOWN PERSON
CAUGHT WITH COLLECTION
OF LAWN SIGNS, NOV 2014



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