**STATE OF MICHIGAN**
**IN THE CIRCUIT COURT FOR LEELANAU COUNTY**

CATHERINE HARTESVELT

Plaintiff,

v.

STEPHEN RAY YODER,

Defendant.
_____/

COURT FILE NO.: 26- -NZ
HON.

Blake K. Ringsmuth (P44013)
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## COMPLAINT

**There is no other civil action between these parties arising out of this same transaction or occurrence as alleged in this complaint pending in this Court nor has any such action been previously filed and dismissed after having been assigned to a judge, nor do I know of any other civil action, not between these parties, arising out of the same occurrence as alleged in this complaint that is either pending or was previously filed and dismissed, transferred, or otherwise disposed of after having been assigned to a judge in this court.**

Plaintiff, Catherine Hartesvelt ("Plaintiff"), by and through her attorneys, RINGSMUTHWUORI PLLC, and for her Complaint against Defendant, Stephen Ray Yoder ("Yoder"), and states as follows:

## NATURE OF CLAIM

1. Plaintiff brings this action seeking the recovery of compensatory and other damages against Defendant for harms and losses suffered due to defamation per se in violation of law as alleged further herein.

2. The amount in controversy is well above the jurisdictional requirement or minimum for this Honorable Court.

3. Venue properly lies in this Court pursuant to MCL .600.1629.

**GENERAL ALLEGATIONS**

4. Plaintiff incorporates by reference the allegations set forth in paragraphs 1 through 3 above, and all subsequent allegations, as if fully set forth herein.

5. At all times relevant, Plaintiff was a resident of Leelanau County, Michigan.

6. At all times relevant, Defendant was and is a resident of Leelanau County, Michigan.

7. On or about January 12, 2026, Defendant attended an informal meeting at Art's Tavern, located in Leelanau County, Michigan. The meeting was attended by a number of private individuals who were Leelanau County residents.

8. Upon information and belief, the meeting was held to allow for a better understanding of Defendant's beliefs and positions regarding issues within Leelanau County.

9. The meeting took place in an area open to the public and other patrons of Art's Tavern.

10. Upon information and belief, the discussions taking place during the informal meeting were overheard by members of the public beyond just those attending the meeting.

11. During the meeting, and apropos of nothing being discussed at the time, Defendant stated as fact that Plaintiff was engaged in an illegal conspiracy to cover up financial corruption

being perpetrated by her and the County Clerk. Further, that Plaintiff's illegal "cover-up" had been going on for some time.

12. Additionally, and due to his position on the Leelanau County Board of Commissioners, Defendant stated he was aware of additional illegal behavior Plaintiff and others were engaged in but could not share that with the group.

13. Defendant's statement of fact regarding Plaintiff's alleged illegal conduct shocked and upset members of the group and caused them to ask questions as to why Defendant was not addressing this serious matter.

14. In response, Defendant stated that he did not have the support of other County Commissioners to deal with the alleged illegality.

15. Subsequent to that meeting, the allegations of Plaintiff's illegality made by Defendant spread beyond the group in the meeting and into the general public.

16. The Defendant's allegations are patently and unequivocally false and without any basis in fact whatsoever.

17. Defendant made those defamatory statements to garner support from the group for Plaintiff's eventual firing. Such firing was previously planned with the County Administrator, among others.

18. Furthermore, Defendant's allegations were made with actual malice knowing they were false and/or with reckless disregard of their falsity.

19. Defendant's allegations of illegality constitute defamation per se pursuant to MCL 600.2911(1).

20. In fact, Plaintiff and her family are long-time reputable and contributing community members of Leelanau County and have engaged in public service for decades.

21. As a direct and proximate result of Defendant's defamatory statements, she has been significantly harmed in both reputation and personally.

**COUNT I-DEFAMATION PER SE**

22. Plaintiff incorporates by reference the allegations set forth in paragraphs 1 through 21 above, and all subsequent allegations, as if fully set forth herein.

23. Defendant's statements during the informal group meeting constituted statements of fact, not opinion, that Plaintiff was engaged in criminal activity, including financial corruption and conspiracy to cover up same.

24. Defendant knew those defamatory statements were untrue when he made them.

25. Alternatively, Defendant made the defamatory statements with reckless disregard to their falsity.

26. Defendant's statements were made with actual malice.

27. Defendant's conduct constitutes defamation per se as defined in MCL 600.2911(1).

28. As a direct result of Defendant's defamatory action, Plaintiff has suffered significant and ongoing harm to her reputation and personally.

29. In addition to the harms alleged, Plaintiff is entitled to an award of exemplary and/or punitive damages, as well as an award of attorneys' fees pursuant to case law and MCL 600.2911.

WHEREFORE, Plaintiff, Catherine Hartesvelt, respectfully requests that this Court enter a judgment against Defendant, Stephen Ray Yoder, in her favor in excess of $25,000.00 that is reasonably calculated to compensate her for damages, including costs and attorney fees, and all other relief deemed just by the Court.

**RINGSMUTHWUORI PLLC**

Date: November 12, 2026

By: */s/: Blake K. Ringsmuth*
Blake K. Ringsmuth (P44013)
Attorney for Plaintiff

**JURY DEMAND**

Plaintiff, Catherine Hartesvelt, by and through her attorneys, RINGSMUTHWUORI PLLC, demands a trial by jury of the above-captioned matter.

**RINGSMUTHWUORI PLLC**

Date: November 12, 2026

By: */s/: Blake K. Ringsmuth*
Blake K. Ringsmuth (P44013)
Attorney for Plaintiff