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Defamation Lawsuit Raises Questions About Retaliation and Accountability in Leelanau County Government

TRAVERSE CITY, MI – A lawsuit filed in Leelanau County against County Commissioner Stephen Yoder raises serious questions about a troubling pattern of retaliation against employees who have reported improper conduct by Leelanau County officials.

The lawsuit, brought by Catherine Hartesvelt, alleges that Yoder publicly and falsely accused her of criminal wrongdoing as part of an effort to undermine her reputation and generate public support for her removal from county employment.

According to the complaint, Yoder falsely and maliciously accused Hartesvelt of participating in a conspiracy to conceal financial corruption.

Significantly, the lawsuit alleges that Yoder's statements were intended to advance a preexisting plan, involving other county officials, to remove Hartesvelt from her position. Her experience raises broader questions about whether similar efforts have been directed at other county employees.

The allegations support the growing concerns about a pattern of retaliation within County government. Several qualified female employees have been forced out following their reports of county leadership's improper workplace conduct.

Within the past year, several complaints concerning the former County Administrator's conduct prompted an investigation by an independent law firm. Following that investigation, the County Board of Commissioners voted unanimously to remove the Administrator. Yet despite the investigation's substantiation of the complaints, certain Commissioners have directed blame toward the women who reported the misconduct rather than the conduct that led to the

Administrator's removal. One Commissioner went so far as to state that the former Administrator "got screwed" by the whistleblower.

"That statement reflects a deeply troubling attitude toward employees who report misconduct," said attorney Blake Ringsmuth of Ringsmuth Wuori PLLC, who represents Hartesvelt. "The Commissioners had an independent law firm investigate the allegations, and they made the decision to remove the Administrator following that investigation. Yet, rather than acknowledging the Administrator's misconduct, some Commissioners blamed the women who brought the misconduct to light."

Ringsmuth emphasized that the circumstances raise broader concerns about retaliation and accountability within county government.

"When employees report improper conduct, government's responsibility is to investigate their concerns, not contrive ways to get rid of them," Ringsmuth said. "This is not simply a question of how one employee was treated. It is about whether a culture has developed in which whistleblowers become targets, and whether some of the very officials entrusted with protecting the integrity of county government have instead become part of the problem."

"Good government depends on good people willing to devote their talents and careers to public service," Ringsmuth continued. "When qualified employees are driven out, particularly after raising legitimate concerns about workplace misconduct, the entire community suffers. And when those employees are repeatedly women, that raises additional questions about the culture and leadership of the organization."

"Ultimately, this case is about accountability," Ringsmuth concluded. "The people of Leelanau County deserve a government where employees can report misconduct without fear, where independent investigations are respected, and where elected officials accept responsibility for their own decisions rather than blaming those who had the courage to speak up. We intend to pursue accountability for those responsible, not simply to obtain justice for our clients but to ensure that other public employees are not subjected to the same misconduct."