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Former Finance Director Sues Leelanau County as Questions Mount Over County Malfeasance

TRAVERSE CITY, MI – A former Leelanau County Finance Director has filed a whistleblower retaliation lawsuit against the County, adding to growing concerns about a pattern of employee mistreatment, repeated departures, and failures of leadership within County government.

The lawsuit, brought by Rio Risbridger under Michigan's Whistleblowers' Protection Act, alleges that County officials systematically punished her after she reported serious financial irregularities, violations of County policy, and improper workplace conduct by former County Administrator James Dyer and others.

Significantly, the County authorized an independent investigation into Risbridger's complaints. According to the lawsuit, the investigation largely substantiated her concerns, resulting in the Board of Commissioners voting unanimously to terminate Dyer. Yet certain Commissioners subsequently blamed Risbridger for his termination, with one reportedly stating that Dyer had gotten "screwed" because of her complaint.

"The County investigated allegations of serious misconduct, substantiated them, and unanimously terminated the Administrator. Yet rather than addressing the underlying problems, some officials turned against the employee who reported them," said attorney Blake Ringsmuth of Ringsmuth Wuori PLLC, who represents Risbridger. "It is difficult to imagine a more troubling message to public employees or classic case of illegal retaliation."

The complaint alleges that retaliation came from multiple County officials and included withholding compensation, and placing her and other female employees under surveillance. It also alleges that officials refused to approve hiring a former employee because she had previously reported misconduct by the same Administrator. That former employee was characterized as being "against" the County for reporting misconduct.

"That allegation speaks volumes about the culture within this administration," Ringsmuth said. "Reporting misconduct should be regarded as an act of integrity, not disloyalty."

The lawsuit follows two recently filed defamation actions against County Commissioners Stephen Yoder and Richard Robbins, both involving allegations that they falsely accused female County employees of criminal wrongdoing.

"What we are witnessing is a train wreck in slow motion," Ringsmuth continued. "Multiple investigations, a revolving door of employees and administrators, and leading to lawsuits against the County and individual Commissioners. At what point do those responsible for governing the County recognize that the problem is not the employees who speak up, but the culture they created that punishes them for doing so?"

Risbridger alleges that the escalating retaliation ultimately forced her resignation in October 2026.

In conclusion, Ringsmuth said, "it is sad that it has come to this. The Commission has had many months to set a new course but has chosen not to. I am thankful that these brave women have chosen to seek accountability from these elected officials. These women are entitled to justice, and the whole County will benefit."

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