



THE FLORIDA SENATE
SPECIAL MASTER ON CLAIM BILLS

Location
515 Knott Building

Mailing Address
404 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1100
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DATE	COMM	ACTION
1/22/18	SM	Fav/1 amendment
	JU	
	GO	
	RC	

January 22, 2018

The Honorable Joe Negron
President, The Florida Senate
Suite 409, The Capitol
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1100

Re: **SB 36** – Senator Denise Grimsley
HB 6525 – Representative Byrd
Relief of Marcus Button

SPECIAL MASTER'S FINAL REPORT

THIS IS A CONTESTED CLAIM BASED ON A JURY AWARD FOR MARCUS BUTTON AGAINST THE DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD OF PASCO COUNTY, TO COMPENSATE THE CLAIMANT FOR INJURIES SUSTAINED IN A MOTOR VEHICLE ACCIDENT RESULTING FROM THE NEGLIGENT OPERATION OF A PASCO COUNTY SCHOOL BUS.

CURRENT STATUS:

On December 6, 2010, an administrative law judge from the Division of Administrative Hearing, serving as a Senate special master, held a de novo hearing on a previous version of this bill, SB 38 (2011). After the hearing, the judge issued a report containing findings of fact and conclusions of law and recommended that the bill be reported favorably with an amendment. That report is attached as an addendum to this report.

Due to the passage of time since the hearing, the Senate President reassigned the claim to me, Miguel Oxamendi. My responsibilities were to review the records relating to the claim bill, be available for questions from the members, and to determine whether changes have occurred since the hearing,

which if known at the hearing, would have significantly altered the findings or recommendation in the Special Master report.

According to information provided by the counsel for the claimant, no changes have occurred since the hearing which might have altered the findings or recommendation in the Special Master's report for SB 38 (2011).

This report recommends an amendment to the bill to correctly reflect the amount of responsibility for the crash that the jury apportioned to the claimant, Marcus Button. The bill provides that the jury apportioned 10 percent of the responsibility to the claimant, but the correct amount is 15 percent.

Additionally, SB 36 is effectively identical to the claim bill filed for the 2011 Legislative Session. However, the 2011 claim bill did not include a claim on behalf of the parents Mark and Robin Button, but the Special Master Report on SB 38 (2011) included relevant findings of fact and conclusions of law to support their claim. Therefore, the undersigned recommends that SB 36 be reported favorably, as amended.

Respectfully submitted,

Miguel Oxamendi
Senate Special Master

cc: Secretary of the Senate



THE FLORIDA SENATE
SPECIAL MASTER ON CLAIM BILLS

Location
402 Senate Office Building

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404 South Monroe Street
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DATE	COMM	ACTION
2/1/11	SM	

February 1, 2011

The Honorable Mike Haridopolous
President, The Florida Senate
Suite 409, The Capitol
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1100

Re: **SB 38 (2011)** – Senator Mike Fasano
Relief of Marcus Button

SPECIAL MASTER'S FINAL REPORT

THIS IS A CONTESTED CLAIM BASED ON A JURY AWARD FOR MARCUS BUTTON AGAINST THE DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD OF PASCO COUNTY, TO COMPENSATE THE CLAIMANT FOR INJURIES SUSTAINED IN A MOTOR VEHICLE ACCIDENT RESULTING FROM THE NEGLIGENT OPERATION OF A PASCO COUNTY SCHOOL BUS.

FINDINGS OF FACT:

On September 22, 2006, the Claimant, Marcus Button, was traveling in the front passenger's seat of a 2005 Dodge Neon, which was being driven by Jessica Juettner, a high school classmate of the Claimant's. The Dodge Neon was owned by Donald Juettner, Ms. Juettner's father.

At approximately 7:50 a.m., the Claimant and Ms. Juettner were headed to school on State Road 54 in Zephyrhills, which is located in Pasco County. As the Claimant and Ms. Juettner traveled east on State Road 54, they approached Meadow Point Boulevard, which runs from north to south and intersects State Road 54 at a right angle. Vehicles heading east and west on State Road 54 are not required to stop at the intersection, as there is no stop sign or traffic light. However, vehicles traveling on Meadow Point Boulevard are required to

come to rest at a stop sign prior to turning onto State Road 54.

As the Claimant and Ms. Juettner approached the intersection described above, a District School Board of Pasco County ("District") school bus, which was 35 feet long and weighed 27,500 pounds, was headed north on Meadow Point Boulevard. The bus driver, District employee John Kinne, brought the bus to rest at the stop sign posted at the intersection of State Road 54. However, due to the heavy volume of morning traffic, Mr. Kinne moved the bus beyond the stop bar to facilitate a left turn onto State Road 54.

Despite the absence of any visual obstructions, Mr. Kinne failed to notice the Dodge Neon being driven by Ms. Juettner that was approaching the intersection from the west and within the speed limit. Believing that the intersection was clear, Mr. Kinne pulled forward and began to turn left (headed west) onto State Road 54, directly in the path of the Dodge Neon that was only several car lengths away. Tragically, Ms. Juettner's vehicle impacted the side of the bus, which was in the early process of making the turn and was pointing northwest. According to William Fox, an eyewitness positioned directly behind the bus, there was nothing Ms. Juettner could have done to avoid the collision.

Due to height disparity between the two vehicles, the front of the Dodge Neon went underneath the bus. As a result, the windshield and a portion of the Neon's roof were crushed. After this initial impact, the bus continued forward for a short distance, with the rear wheels of the bus striking the passenger's side of the Neon. Photographs of the Dodge Neon reveal significant intrusion on the driver's side of the vehicle, as well as some degree of intrusion on the passenger's side.

The accident was investigated by Trooper Jose Ramos of the Florida Highway Patrol. Trooper Ramos concluded that Mr. Kinne failed to yield to Ms. Juettner's vehicle, and was therefore at fault. Significantly, Trooper Ramos further determined that Ms. Juettner did not contribute to the accident.

Ms. Juettner, who was wearing her seatbelt, was not seriously injured in the collision. However, the Claimant, who did not

have his seatbelt fastened, sustained significant injuries to his head. Specifically, the Claimant suffered trauma center, where he was hospitalized for nearly a month. The Claimant was then transferred to a rehabilitation center, where he remained for approximately four weeks.

As a result of the accident, the Claimant, who is now 20 years old, continues to suffer from a variety of maladies, which include:

- Impaired judgment and the inability to make simple decisions, such as when it is safe to cross a road. Accordingly, the claimant requires almost constant supervision.
- Substantially impaired vision in one eye. In addition, neither eye can look up or down, and both are permanently dilated.
- No sense of smell.
- A misshapen and asymmetrical head.
- Hallucinations and other mental health issues that require numerous psychiatric medications. At present, the Claimant takes 13 daily medications, ten of which are anti-psychotic drugs. Although there is evidence indicating that the Claimant suffered from minor emotional issues prior to the accident (e.g., fighting and other disruptive behavior at school), his present psychiatric problems are clearly a manifestation of the injuries sustained in the September 22, 2006, traffic accident.
- Memory and cognitive deficits.

According to Dr. Paul Kornberg, a physician specializing in pediatric rehabilitation, the impairments to the Claimant's judgment, memory, and cognitive ability, combined with his psychiatric issues, will make it nearly impossible for the Claimant to find and maintain employment.

LITIGATION HISTORY:

In September 2007, the Claimant filed a negligence action against the District. The matter proceeded to a jury trial in July of 2009, during which the Claimant presented the testimony of multiple witnesses, which included Dr. Kornberg, Dr. John Dabrowski (a neuropsychologist), Brenda Mulder (a certified public accountant and forensic economist), Dr. Mitchell Drucker (a neuroophthamologist), and a seatbelt expert, Dr. Michael Freeman. The Claimant

elicited evidence that his future medical bills would range from \$6.2 million to \$10.8 million.

During its defense, the District presented the testimony of Dr. Robert Martinez, who opined that the Claimant would not need to reside in an assisted living facility. As one of its other significant witnesses, the District called an accident reconstructionist, James Parrish, who testified that Ms. Juettner could have avoided the accident if she had applied her brakes sufficiently.

On July 27, 2009, the jury returned a verdict in favor of the Claimant, in which it determined that the Claimant was permanently and totally disabled and that 65 percent of the responsibility should be apportioned to the District, 20 percent to Ms. Juettner (for failing to slow her vehicle and/or failing to require the Claimant to wear his seatbelt), and 15 percent to the Claimant. The jury further concluded that the Claimant sustained the following damages:

- \$564,294.50 for future medical expenses.
- \$9800.00 for lost earning up to age 18.
- \$467,137.50 for future lost earnings.
- \$324,999.90 for past pain and suffering.
- \$758,333.31 for future pain and suffering.
- Total damages: \$2,124,565.21.

Based on the jury's finding that the District was 65 percent responsible, final judgment was entered for the Claimant against the school board in the amount of \$1,380,967.39. The school board has paid \$163,000 against this award, leaving \$1,217,967.39 unpaid.

A separate judgment for the Claimant's parents was entered against the District in the amount of \$289,396.85, based upon an award for past medical expenses and a loss of consortium. However, during the final hearing before the undersigned, counsel for the Claimant stated that the parents are not seeking any recovery through the claim bill process.

No appeal of the final judgment was taken to the Second District Court of Appeal.

CLAIMANT'S POSITION:

The Claimant contends that John Kinne, the operator of a bus owned by the District, was negligent by failing to yield to the vehicle in which he was traveling as a passenger. As a result of Mr. Kinne's negligence, the Claimant suffered permanent injuries. The Claimant further argues that:

- The jury should not have apportioned any responsibility to himself or Ms. Juettner.
- The jury erred by determining that future medical expenses totaled only \$564,294.50, where the evidence established that the low range for future medical expenses was \$6,222,038. Although the Claimant's counsel never provided the undersigned with a precise figure, it appears that the Claimant is requesting that Senate Bill 38 direct the District to pay, at the least, \$6,222,038 for future medical expenses, \$9,800 for lost earnings up to age 18, \$467,137.50 for future lost earnings, \$324,999.90 for past pain and suffering, and \$758,333.31 for future pain and suffering. Taking into account the \$163,000 the District has already paid, this would leave \$7,619,308.71 unpaid. The Claimant suggests that that this sum could be payable over a ten year period.

RESPONDENT'S POSITION:

The District objects to any payment to the Claimant through a claim bill. The District also contends that:

- The jury should have allocated a greater percentage of responsibility to the Claimant for failing to wear his seatbelt, and to Ms. Juettner for not taking sufficient action to avoid the collision.
- The Claimant is not deserving of the legislature's grace due to his criminal background and marijuana use, all of which preceded the accident in this cause.
- In the event the legislature determines that the passage of a claim bill is appropriate, the outstanding jury award should be payable in equal amounts over a five-year period.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

Mr. Kinne had a duty to operate the bus at all times with consideration for the safety of pedestrians and other drivers. Pedigo v. Smith, 395 So. 2d 615, 616 (Fla. 5th DCA 1981). Specifically, it was Mr. Kinne's duty to observe and yield to Ms. Juettner's vehicle as it approached the intersection. See §316.123(2)(a), Fla. Stat. (2006) ("[E]very driver of a vehicle

approaching a stop intersection indicated by a stop sign shall stop at a clearly marked stop line. After having stopped, the driver shall yield the right-of-way to any vehicle which has entered the intersection from another highway"). Mr. Kinne breached this duty of care and the breach was the proximate cause of the Claimant's injuries.

The Pasco County School District, as Mr. Kinne's employer, is liable for his negligent act. Hollis v. Sch. Bd. of Leon Cnty., 384 So. 2d 661, 665 (Fla. 1st DCA 1980)"{holding that a school board is liable for any negligent act committed by a public school bus driver whom it employs, provided the act is within the scope of the driver's employment); see also Aurbach v. Gallina, 753 So. 2d 60, 62 (Fla. 2000) (holding that the dangerous instrumentality doctrine "imposes strict vicarious liability upon the owner of a motor vehicle who voluntarily entrusts that motor vehicle to an individual whose negligent operation causes damage to another").

The jury's findings regarding damages and the allocation of responsibility were reasonable and should not be disturbed. Although the undersigned does not believe that Ms. Juettner could have avoided the accident (the undersigned rejects the contrary opinion of the school board's accident reconstructionist, whose conclusions were based on the erroneous premise that the school bus was accelerating at the same rate as a passenger vehicle), Ms. Juettner was obliged to require the Claimant to wear his seatbelt. An allocation of 20 percent to Ms. Juettner for her failure to do so was appropriate.

Although the Claimant contends that the jury's award with respect to future medical expenses was against the manifest weight of the evidence, the Claimant could have pursued this issue on appeal. As discussed above, however, neither the Claimant nor the District appealed the final judgment to the Second District Court of Appeal. Accordingly, the undersigned rejects the Claimant's argument that he is entitled to a sum greater than the amount of the excess judgment.

LEGISLATIVE HISTORY:

This is the first claim bill presented to the Senate in this matter.

ATTORNEYS FEES:

The Claimant's attorneys have agreed to limit their fees to 25 percent of any amount awarded by the Legislature in compliance with section 768.28(8), Florida Statutes. Lobbyist's fees are included with the attorney's fees.

COLLATERAL SOURCES:

The Claimant received \$100,000 from his underinsured motorist coverage, and \$10,000 From Ms. Juettner's insurance carrier. At present, the Claimant is also receiving Social Security Disability Insurance.

SPECIAL ISSUES:

On October 16, 2002, approximately four years prior to the accident giving rise to this matter, the Claimant was arrested for burglary of an unoccupied dwelling, a second degree felony, and petit theft, a first degree misdemeanor. With respect to both charges, The adjudication of guilt was withheld and the Claimant was placed on probation with special conditions. Based on the Claimant's age at the time (12}, as well as the underlying facts of the offense, the undersigned rejects the District's argument that these criminal charges should militate against the passage of a claim bill.

Senate Bill 38, as it is presently drafted, erroneously reads that the jury allocated 10 percent of the responsibility to the Claimant. As noted above, the Claimant was found to be 15 percent responsible. Senate Bill 38 also provides that a final judgment of \$875,000 was entered for the Claimant against the District, and that a sum of \$675,000 remains unpaid. Both figures are incorrect, as a final judgment of \$1,380,967.39 was entered for the Claimant against the school board, \$1,217,967.39 of which remains unpaid. Senate Bill 38 should be amended to reflect these corrections.

Although a special needs trust has been created for the Claimant, the bill as drafted does not specify that any funds awarded be placed in trust for the Claimant's care. Accordingly, the undersigned further recommends that the bill be amended before approval to require that such funds be held in trust.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

For the reasons set forth above, the undersigned recommends that Senate Bill 38 (2011) be reported FAVORABLY, as amended.

Respectfully submitted,

Edward T. Bauer
Senate Special Master

cc: Secretary of the Senate