

District 14, Robbins face possible suit

Sexual harassment case against Hewlett High School principal lingers

By KEITH GRANT

The Hewlett-Woodmere School District may be facing a lawsuit from attorneys for a Hewlett High School teacher over claims of sexual harassment. Exiled Hewlett High School principal Dr. Donald Robbins, an alleged source of the harassment, also faces the possibility of legal troubles, officials said.

According to Garden City-based attorney Cary Scott Goldinger, the school district was put on a "notice of claim" in February, which must precede such a law suit against a municipality.

"It's a statutory requirement," he said. "Any municipality would get one. It's a condition precedent to bringing a suit to the district." Though there's a question as to whether the notice is required in this case, Mr. Goldinger said, "It's a precaution. It's like chicken soup, it can't hurt."

Hewlett-Woodmere school board president Richard Braverman would not comment other than to say he was not aware of any suit facing the district at this time. Mr. Goldinger, though, said he was in the process of preparing for a potential suit, drafting a summons of complaint. If there

is no settlement between the parties, Mr. Goldinger said he expects to move forward with a suit.

Manhattan-based attorney George Shebitz represented Dr. Robbins during his seven-month legal battle with the district, which resulted in a deal in which Dr. Robbins is remaining on the district's payroll for another year but will not be present in the high school. Mr. Shebitz has been in contact with Mr. Goldinger, but stated that he does not currently represent the former principal.

"Since there is no lawsuit, I don't know if I still represent him, to the best of my knowledge" Mr. Shebitz said. In regards to the possibility of a suit, he said, "I don't comment on potential suits. All of this is speculative." Since Dr. Robbins is still an employee of the district, he could be represented by the district or by the union.

Dr. Robbins was suspended from his job in November 1998 amid a wall of silence from all sides, though charges of sexual harassment against the 15-year principal soon emerged. He first fought the charges and was scheduled to receive a public hearing in Mineola in May. The hearing was

postponed indefinitely days in advance, and a settlement was reached between him and the school district in June.

The signed settlement document declared that "on or about December 10, 1998, Employer determined there was probable cause for disciplinary charges against the Employee pursuant to Education Law." It went on to acknowledge Dr. Robbins' insistence of innocence, but the mutual desire for the matter to be resolved outside of the court room. It stated, "Employee has denied his guilt of said charges and asserted his right to a hearing of them as provided by statute; and...the parties are desirous of avoiding the uncertainties attendant upon such a proceeding."

Throughout the saga, district officials refused to comment on the charge against Dr. Robbins, but in March Mr. Shebitz offered a description of the alleged incident. According to the attorney, Dr. Robbins entered the high school cafeteria and spoke with several students. He then had an exchange with a teacher regarding the food on her tray. Mr. Shebitz said his client then walked past the teacher and left.

"She then turned to another teacher and said, "Did you see that? He grabbed my buttocks," Mr. Shebitz said. The attorney claimed that the teacher, herself, did not report the incident, but that two others did. He also claimed that his client was then removed from his position before the teacher in question spoke with administrators.

The possibility of a law suit filed by the teacher has long hung over the case, but appears more likely now that Dr. Robbins and the district have settled. The basis of the suit, according to Mr. Goldinger, includes "sexual harassment, a hostile work environment, gender dis-

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Dr. Robbins' attorney

crimination...should I go on?" He said that more than the alleged incident was involved in the case.

"This involves more than one incident, over a period of time," Mr. Goldinger said. Though the agreement Dr. Robbins signed with the district did not include an admission of guilt, Mr. Goldinger said the settlement "does not exonerate either party."

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CARY SCOTT GOLDINGER
Attorney for Hewlett High School teacher

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