

1. PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Ex-Oregon municipal judge says she intends to sue over termination

- Published: Mar. 07, 2025, 1:36 p.m.

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By

- **Tribune News Service**

A judge who presided over Bend's municipal court for two years intends to sue the city, alleging her termination in November was a violation of the federal law that protects government workers who report wrongdoing within their agencies.

In a notice filed with the city Feb. 14, attorneys claim former judge Angela Ruocco was fired because she reported what she felt was an overreach of legal authority by lower court staff who allegedly took actions on judicial matters using Ruocco's signature without her knowing.

The notice says Ruocco — who was hired by the University of Oregon School of Law in January to help prepare students for the bar and licensing — intends to make a “claim for damages against the city” in connection to her Nov. 22 termination.

Ruocco previously practiced immigration law before the U.S. Department of Justice courts, served as an assistant city solicitor for the city of Baltimore and an assistant attorney general for the state of Maryland, according to a recent press release. She also worked as an administrative law judge for the state.

According to the notice, Ruocco's work on the bench in city court earned praise from city leaders and peers.

She was hired in Sept. 2022 and her contract was renewed in 2023. Issues with court staff escalated during her second year of service.

Ruocco oversaw the city's municipal court, which handles minor traffic violations, parking citations and city ordinance infractions issued within the city of Bend. The judge is one of two positions — in addition to the city manager — within the city for which the

city council and mayor are responsible for performance reviews and hiring and firing decisions.

According to the notice, city leaders told Ruocco in a Nov. 22 phone call that she was fired because she had “not taken ‘ownership’ for her role in creating mistrust with the court staff.”

“This pretext, however, is nothing more than shooting the messenger who reported the unlawful conduct. It should be no surprise that Judge Ruocco’s uncovering of illegal, potentially criminal practices and abuse of authority, her repeated reports of it to supervisors, and her efforts to change practices so that they stopped, created fear among the court staff,” Ruocco’s attorney wrote in the notice.

The notice alleges that issues began in late 2023, when Ruocco observed a court employee, Shannon Warner, a longtime clerk who had recently been promoted to supervisor, take actions on judicial matters that Ruocco believed were beyond Warner’s authority. Later, Warner allegedly used Ruocco’s signature to vacate a conviction and judgement of the court without the chief judge’s approval. Further investigation found that clerks were also engaging in similar behavior, according to Ruocco’s attorneys. The notice also claims Warner was preparing to certify using Ruocco’s signature that defendants had participated in driver’s improvement courses when they had not.

That led Ruocco to change court practices and raise the issue to the city’s finance director and later the human resources director and city attorney. According to Ruocco’s claims, court staff said their behavior was standard practice for the court, as did the city’s finance director.

Ruocco’s attorneys cite a section of rules for the Bend Municipal Court, which state that decisions like the ones made by the court’s staff “shall be reviewed by the judge and the judge shall decide the motion and grant or deny relief as the judge deems appropriate.”

When asked for comment on Thursday, the city rebutted Ruocco’s claims that the judge’s termination was related to her reports about staff.

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