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## Document (1)

1. [Coleman v. Ohio DOT, 2009-Ohio-6887](#)

**Client/Matter:** -None-

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## Coleman v. Ohio DOT

Court of Claims of Ohio

August 25, 2009, Filed

Case No. 2009-03096-AD

### **Reporter**

2009-Ohio-6887 \*; 2009 Ohio Misc. LEXIS 351 \*\*

LINDA MASSIE COLEMAN, Plaintiff v. OHIO DEPT. OF TRANSPORTATION, Defendant

### **Core Terms**

tree limb, roadway, overhanging, highways, preponderance of the evidence, constructive notice, proximately caused, hazardous condition, burden of proof, tree branch, damage-causing, negligently, MEMORANDUM, furnishes, inspected, responded, milepost, traveled, notice, proven, fails

### **Case Summary**

#### **Procedural Posture**

Plaintiff driver brought suit against defendant Ohio Department of Transportation (DOT) to recover the cost of automotive repair, which she contended she incurred as a result of negligence on the part of DOT in maintaining the roadway.

#### **Overview**

The driver was traveling on the highway when her vehicle struck a large tree branch overhanging the traveled portion of the roadway at an extremely low height, causing damage to the vehicle. In the driver's suit to recover the cost of the repairs incurred, DOT contended that it had no knowledge of the overhanging tree limb prior to the driver's incident. In rendering judgment for DOT, the court found that there was no indication that DOT had actual or constructive notice of the overhanging tree limb. Moreover, the court found that the driver had not proven that DOT failed to discharge a duty owed to her or that her injury was proximately caused by DOT's negligence. The driver failed to show that the damage-causing object was connected to any conduct under the control of DOT and failed to show any negligence on the part of DOT.

#### **Outcome**

The court denied the driver's claim and rendered judgment for DOT.

### **LexisNexis® Headnotes**

Governments > Public Improvements > Bridges & Roads

Torts > ... > Proof > Evidence > Burdens of Proof

Governments > State & Territorial  
Governments > Property

Torts > ... > General Premises Liability > Dangerous Conditions > Duty to Maintain

Torts > ... > General Premises Liability > Dangerous Conditions > Known Dangers

#### **HN1 [down arrow] Public Improvements, Bridges & Roads**

The Ohio Department of Transportation (DOT) has the duty to maintain its highways in a reasonably safe condition for the motoring public. However, DOT is not an insurer of the safety of its highways. In order to prove a breach of the duty to maintain the highways, the plaintiff must prove, by a preponderance of the evidence, that DOT had actual or constructive notice of the precise condition or defect alleged to have caused the accident. DOT is only liable for roadway condition of which it has notice but fails to reasonably correct.

Governments > Public Improvements > Bridges & Roads

Torts > ... > General Premises Liability > Dangerous Conditions > Duty to Maintain

Governments > State & Territorial  
 Governments > Property

Torts > ... > Proof > Evidence > Inferences & Presumptions

Torts > ... > General Premises Liability > Dangerous Conditions > Known Dangers

## **HN2** Public Improvements, Bridges & Roads

In order to recover on a claim for damage caused due to the defective condition of a roadway, the plaintiff must prove either: 1) that the Ohio Department of Transportation (DOT) had actual or constructive notice of the defect and failed to respond in a reasonable time or responded in a negligent manner, or 2) that DOT, in a general sense, maintains its highways negligently. For constructive notice to be proven, the plaintiff must show that sufficient time has elapsed after the dangerous condition appears, so that under the circumstances, DOT should have acquired knowledge of its existence. The trier of fact is precluded from making an inference of DOT's constructive notice, unless evidence is presented in respect to the time that the defective condition appeared on the roadway.

Torts > ... > Proof > Evidence > Burdens of Proof

Torts > Negligence > Elements

## **HN3** Evidence, Burdens of Proof

For a plaintiff to prevail on a claim of negligence, she must prove, by a preponderance of the evidence, that the defendant owed her a duty, that it breached that duty, and that the breach proximately caused her injuries. The plaintiff has the burden of proving, by a preponderance of the evidence, that she suffered a loss and that this loss was proximately caused by the defendant's negligence. However, it is the duty of a party on whom the burden of proof rests to produce evidence which furnishes a reasonable basis for sustaining his claim. If the evidence so produced furnishes only a basis for a choice among different possibilities as to any issue in the case, he fails to sustain such burden.

## **Opinion**

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## **MEMORANDUM DECISION**

### **FINDINGS OF FACT**

[\*P1] 1) On February 11, 2009, at approximately 11:00 a.m., plaintiff, Linda Massie Coleman, was traveling south on State Route 560 "approximately 1/2 mile from Westville" when her 2004 Honda Accord struck a large tree branch overhanging the traveled portion of the roadway at an extremely low height. The tree branch caused damage to the windshield and right aperture panel of plaintiff's vehicle.

[\*P2] 2) Plaintiff implied that the damage to her car was proximately caused by negligence on the part of defendant, Department of Transportation (DOT), in failing to maintain the roadway free of hazardous conditions such as the overhanging tree branch on State Route 560. Plaintiff filed this complaint seeking to recover \$ 745.01, the cost of automotive repair expense she incurred resulting from the February 11, 2009 incident. The filing fee was paid.

[\*P3] 3) Defendant denied liability based on the contention that no DOT personnel had any knowledge of the hazardous condition caused by the overhanging tree limb prior to plaintiff's property damage event. Defendant denied receiving any reports prior to February 11, 2009 from any entity concerning an overhanging tree limb which [\*\*2] DOT located at milepost 2.50 on State Route 560 in Champaign County. Defendant acknowledged receiving a report of the tree limb after plaintiff's damage occurrence and responded by dispatching two DOT employees to remove the tree limb on the same day as plaintiff's damage incident. Defendant suggested that "it is likely the tree limb existed for only a short time before the incident."

[\*P4] Furthermore, defendant asserted that plaintiff failed to offer evidence to prove the roadway was negligently maintained. Defendant related that the DOT "Champaign County Manager inspects all state roadways within the county at least two times a month." Apparently, no overhanging tree condition was discovered at milepost 2.50 on State Route 560 the last time that section of roadway was inspected prior to February 11, 2009.

### **CONCLUSIONS OF LAW**

[\*P5] Defendant HN1 has the duty to maintain its highways in a reasonably safe condition for the motoring

public. *Knickel v. Ohio Department of Transportation (1976)*, 49 Ohio App. 2d 335, 3 O.O. 3d 413, 361 N.E. 2d 486. However, defendant is not an insurer of the safety of its highways. See *Kniskern v. Township of Somerford (1996)*, 112 Ohio App. 3d 189, 678 N.E. 2d 273; *Rhodus v. Ohio Dept. of Transp. (1990)*, 67 Ohio App. 3d 723, 588 N.E. 2d 864.

[\*P6] [\*\*3] In order to prove a breach of the duty to maintain the highways, plaintiff must prove, by a preponderance of the evidence, that defendant had actual or constructive notice of the precise condition or defect alleged to have caused the accident. *McClellan v. ODOT (1986)*, 34 Ohio App. 3d 247, 517 N.E. 2d 1388. Defendant is only liable for roadway condition of which it has notice but fails to reasonably correct. *Bussard v. Dept. of Transp. (1986)*, 31 Ohio Misc. 2d 1, 31 Ohio B. 64, 507 N.E.2d 1179.

[\*P7] **HN2**[] In order to recover on a claim of this type, plaintiff must prove either: 1) that defendant had actual or constructive notice of the defect (tree limb) and failed to respond in a reasonable time or responded in a negligent manner, or 2) that defendant, in a general sense, maintains its highways negligently. *Denis v. Department of Transportation (1976)*, 75-0287-AD. For constructive notice to be proven, plaintiff must show that sufficient time has elapsed after the dangerous condition (tree limb) appears, so that under the circumstances, defendant should have acquired knowledge of its existence. *Guisher v. Dept. of Transportation (1978)*, 78-0126-AD. The trier of fact is precluded from making an inference [\*\*4] of defendant's constructive notice, unless evidence is presented in respect to the time that the defective condition (tree limb) appeared on the roadway. *Spires v. Ohio Highway Department (1988)*, 61 Ohio Misc. 2d 262, 577 N.E. 2d 458. Evidence has shown that defendant did not have any notice, either actual or constructive, of the damage-causing tree limb condition.

[\*P8] **HN3**[] For plaintiff to prevail on a claim of negligence, she must prove, by a preponderance of the evidence, that defendant owed her a duty, that it breached that duty, and that the breach proximately caused her injuries. *Armstrong v. Best Buy Company, Inc.*, 99 Ohio St. 3d 79, 2003 Ohio 2573, 788 N.E. 2d 1088, P8 citing *Menifee v. Ohio Welding Products, Inc. (1984)*, 15 Ohio St. 3d 75, 77, 15 Ohio B. 179, 472 N.E.2d 707. Plaintiff has the burden of proving, by a preponderance of the evidence, that she suffered a loss and that this loss was proximately caused by defendant's negligence. *Barnum v. Ohio State*

*University (1979)*, 76-0368-AD, 1979 Ohio Misc. LEXIS 94. However, "[i]t is the duty of a party on whom the burden of proof rests to produce evidence which furnishes a reasonable basis for sustaining his claim. If the evidence so produced furnishes only a basis [\*\*5] for a choice among different possibilities as to any issue in the case, he fails to sustain such burden." Paragraph three of the syllabus in *Steven v. Indus. Comm. (1945)*, 145 Ohio St. 198, 30 O.O. 415, 61 N.E.2d 198, approved and followed.

[\*P9] Plaintiff has not proven, by a preponderance of the evidence, that defendant failed to discharge a duty owed to her or that her injury was proximately caused by defendant's negligence. Plaintiff failed to show that the damage-causing object was connected to any conduct under the control of defendant, or any negligence on the part of defendant. *Taylor v. Transportation Dept. (1998)*, 97-10898-AD; *Weininger v. Department of Transportation (1999)*, 99-10909-AD; *Wetherell v. Ohio Dept. of Transportation (2000)*, 2000-04758-AD. Consequently, plaintiff claim is denied.

#### ENTRY OF ADMINISTRATIVE DETERMINATION

Having considered all the evidence in the claim file and, for the reasons set forth in the memorandum decision filed concurrently herewith, judgment is rendered in favor of defendant. Court costs are assessed against plaintiff.

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