
Police motorcycle crash spurs suit

By GEORGE WILKENS

gwilkens@tampatrib.com

Three women struck by a motorcycle during a Plant City Police Department demonstration on Nov. 18 have filed lawsuits asserting that the city failed to provide safety barriers and seating beyond the vehicle's path of travel.

The Greater Plant City Chamber of Commerce also is named as a defendant in the lawsuits. The chamber hosted the motorcycle demonstration for its annual leadership program.

The three women were among 17 chamber members attending the event outside police headquarters when an 800-pound Harley-Davidson went out of control and skidded into the metal bleachers where they were seated.

When Officer Chad Rader applied the front brake of the 2005 motorcycle, the wheel locked and the cycle skidded, leaving a 41-foot mark, according to an accident report compiled by Plant City police.

As the motorcycle approached the bleachers, an officer clocked its speed at 37 mph.

The lawsuits' plaintiffs are: Gina Lynn Connor-Edgemon, 43, and Pamela Knight, 40, both of Plant City; and Charity Freeman, 51, of Valrico.

Helen Stratigakos, a Tampa attorney who filed the lawsuits, was unavailable for comment Monday. But one week after the accident, she said Connor-Edgemon, longtime owner/operator of Tip to Toe Day Spa & Gifts in Plant City, sustained severe wounds to her right leg, requiring surgery and blood transfusions.

Knight also was admitted to South Florida Baptist Hospital in Plant City with leg wounds. She was released two days later.

Freeman was released from the hospital the day of the accident after her knee was bandaged.

Tom Scarritt, a Tampa attorney who has handled the case for the city since shortly after the accident, said he tried to negotiate settlements without going to court. In late May and early June, however, he received "voluminous packages from each of the three" plaintiffs alleging injuries so extensive that it became obvious mediation was unlikely, he said Monday.

"We realized we had to let them file suit and get subpoena powers" for the city, Scarritt said. "We really have to have them examined by a doctor of our choosing."

Chamber president Marion Smith declined comment on the lawsuits.

The lawsuits allege the defendants did not erect safety barriers and failed "to properly situate the bleachers in a manner that kept all spectators in a safe area and position."

They also alleged the city and chamber failed to take steps to remove dangerous conditions and warn the women of "non-obvious dangerous conditions which could not be removed."

The lawsuits, filed Thursday in Hillsborough Circuit Court, each seek a jury trial and compensation for medical expenses and losses in excess of \$15,000, the minimum before a case can be heard in circuit court.