

NEWS

‘There was no cocaine’: Local sheriff’s office facing federal lawsuit

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PORTAGE COUNTY, Ohio (WJW) – A federal lawsuit accuses three [Portage County](#) sheriff’s deputies and their boss, Sheriff Bruce Zuchowski, of violating the rights of two men who were falsely arrested last year and charged with cocaine possession and trafficking.

The story began to unfold on August 29, 2023, when an SUV was pulled over on Interstate 76 by a deputy for not having side mirrors and for having tinted windows and an obscured tag.

“He was perfectly within his rights, as there was probable cause for him to pull the vehicle over because it was not in compliance,” said civil attorney Eddie Sipplen, who represents the lawsuit plaintiffs.

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The sheriff's office even posted a story on Facebook about the arrests, touting the work of the deputies and the seizure of 65 grams of cocaine.

However, testing by BCI later confirmed the white powder was not an illegal drug.

"There was no cocaine, there was no meth, no fentanyl, no nothing. It was what my clients said it was, Arm & Hammer Baking Soda powder to absorb wetness in the carpeting," said Sipplen.

After learning about the results of the testing, and watching video of the traffic stop, the Portage County Prosecutor's Office dropped the charges.

The lawsuit accuses the deputies of throwing away the negative test results and filing false reports.

"They perpetrated a fraud upon the prosecutor's office. They were the ones who presented the information to the grand jury and they were the ones who lied to the grand jury about what they found," said Sipplen.

The suit seeks damages, accusing the three deputies and Sheriff Zuchowski of violations that include reckless conduct and false imprisonment.

"You fabricated a drug charge that caused my clients to be arrested and incarcerated and they had to post some form of bond. That is the form of the false imprisonment that started with the false narrative that was created at the roadside," said Sipplen.

The sheriff's office referred questions about the lawsuit to Portage County Prosecutor Victor Viglucci. He declined comment on the litigation but did say the county's insurance carrier has assigned a Cleveland law firm to defend the sheriff's office and the three deputies.

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The attorney for Robinson and Metcalf says it is Sheriff Zuchowski who is ultimately responsible for the conduct of his deputies during the traffic stop and the investigation that followed.

"As the chief law enforcement officer, he's responsible for insuring that his deputies are following policies and procedures and that they are adequately trained and qualified for the jobs they have," said Sipplen.

He says Robinson and Metcalf served at total of 90 days in jail following their arrest and indictment, and says as a result they lost their jobs.

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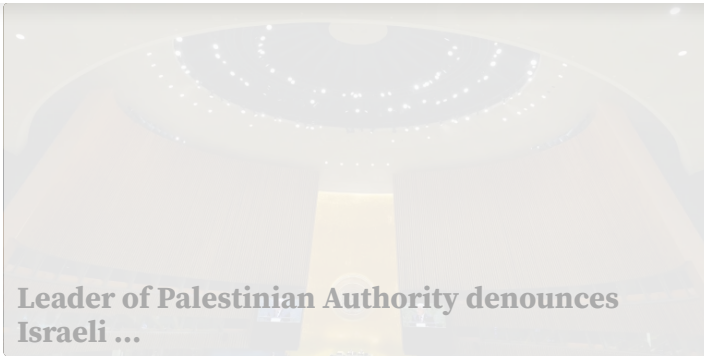
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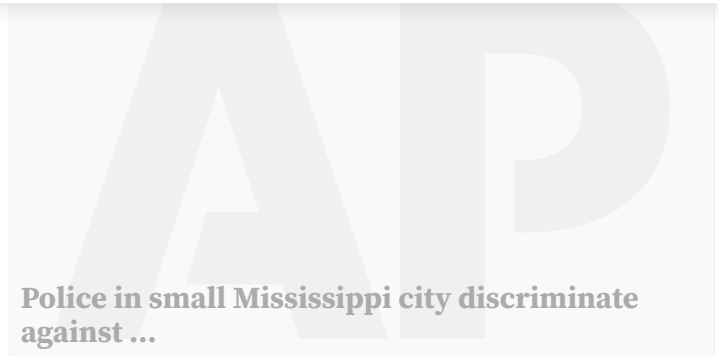
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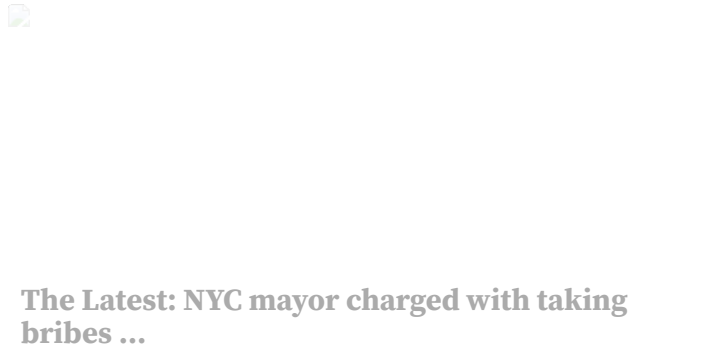
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