

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 3, 2019

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Hilliard City Council Files Civil Suit Against Auditing Firm

HILLIARD, Ohio – Attorneys representing Hilliard City Council filed a civil suit Wednesday against the City’s former auditing firm, alleging breach of contract and negligence that led to the theft more than \$500,000 by former Deputy Director of Recreation and Parks Heather Ernst.

The suit alleges that during 10 years of audits of City finances and practices, the firm of Clark, Schaefer & Hackett Co. failed to identify material weaknesses in the City’s cash-handling policies that could have prevented the theft of significant funds by Ms. Ernst over a period of several years.

The attorney for Council, Christopher Burch of the firm Lane Alton, filed suit in Franklin County Court of Common Pleas on behalf of City Council Wednesday.

Speaking on behalf of City Council, President Kelly McGivern said, “When we first learned of the theft of taxpayer dollars, we pledged to our residents that we would hold those responsible accountable. This is the latest action to accomplishing that pledge.

“Hilliard’s lawsuit alleges that the accounting firm failed to identify material weaknesses in Hilliard’s internal controls that needed to be corrected. Additionally, Hilliard alleges that for many years Clark, Shaffer, Hackett & Co., failed to identify any material weaknesses in Hilliard’s cash handling policies. The suit alleges that if they had done so, we believe Heather Ernst’s theft would have been identified sooner.

“We are shocked at the lack of accountability auditing firms have to taxpayers with respect to identifying material weaknesses. We are calling on our state auditor and state lawmakers to tighten up the auditing standards in Ohio that have allowed unscrupulous individuals to steal public dollars. Additionally, we support state legislation that would require a listing of auditing firms that were involved in communities where this type of theft occurred. The time is now to shine a light on the weaknesses of these state-mandated audits that taxpayers must pay for.”

In October 2018, former City of Hilliard Deputy Director of Recreation and Parks Heather Ernst pleaded guilty to two felonies: theft in office and attempted tampering with records.

Ernst was sentenced to one year in prison followed by three years of community control and ordered to pay restitution to the City of \$271,898. To date, the City has received approximately \$162,000 of that money from Ernst’s state pension.

“City Council remains committed to representing and protecting the interests of Hilliard residents. Our residents must be able to trust their elected officials and local government in these kinds of circumstances,” McGivern said. “For that reason, we believe that those responsible for allowing these thefts to occur must be held accountable for what Council perceives as negligence.”