

City to pay \$450,000 to settle suit over firing

By Craig Gustafson

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SAN DIEGO – The city of San Diego has reached a \$450,000 settlement in a wrongful-termination lawsuit with its former disability services coordinator, who said Mayor Jerry Sanders fired her after she issued a report he didn't like.

Linda Woodbury, who is blind, was fired in November 2006 – one day after Sanders proposed spending \$50 million over five years for various projects to comply with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act.

Woodbury, 61, had told Sanders five months earlier that the city needed to spend \$500 million on those projects to avoid sanctions under federal law.

Woodbury sued, claiming that she was fired in retaliation and wrongfully terminated because of her disability. The city argued that her firing was based on poor job performance.

“I'm glad to have this behind me and go on with my life,” Woodbury said yesterday. “I'm kind of numb.”

The City Council has to approve the settlement, which is likely to happen next week. The city initially offered \$25,000 as the sides negotiated for two days before coming to an agreement late Tuesday. The trial was scheduled to begin Oct. 17.

At the time of the firing, Sanders said he didn't know anything about Woodbury's status and couldn't comment on personnel matters. His spokesman had no comment yesterday.

Woodbury said one of Sanders' deputy chiefs told her that the mayor “no longer has confidence in your leadership, and he doesn't believe you are supporting the organization.” He gave her 30 minutes to pack her things and leave.

“We strongly still contest that she was terminated because she was blind, as the plaintiff says,” said Keith Phillips, a deputy city attorney. “She had performance issues. That's why she was terminated.”

As for who was in the wrong, Woodbury's attorney, Josh Gruenberg, said: "In the end, the money speaks louder than anything he says."

A year before she was fired, Woodbury received a leadership award from the National Conflict Resolution Center for the work she had done for the city.

Woodbury, who had an annual salary of \$75,000, acknowledged that she wasn't the most popular city employee as she tried to ensure access for disabled people. In one case, she said, the front of the Mission Valley library had to be rebuilt two or three times.

"It's my job to protect the city from lawsuits," she said.

The city contended that Woodbury was fired because she didn't complete a much-needed strategy report on disability services, but she said she doesn't believe the report has been completed since she left nearly two years ago.

Woodbury said she plans to start her own company, which will focus on professional speaking and sales training. She previously worked with companies such as Coca-Cola and 3M on ADA compliance before spending seven years with the city.

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