Police panel boots $800,000 deal

Elderly woman wooed?: She changed will, left sergeant millions and sparked a flurry of questions about ethics.

By JAMES A. KIMBLE

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PORTSMOUTH — The Police Commission voted not to accept an out-of-court settlement that would give $425,000 to a police sergeant from the contested estate of a deceased 93-year-old woman.

The city's police and fire departments stood to gain $800,000 in total from the agreement.

But Wednesday's vote signaled Portsmouth's reluctance to accept the windfall, as residents call for an independent investigation of police Sgt. Aaron Goodwin. Shortly before Geraldine Webber died on Dec. 11, 2012, Goodwin became the primary beneficiary of her estate, estimated to be worth $2.6 million to $2.7 million.

Questions surrounding the relationship between Goodwin and Webber have thrown residents into a stir about police ethics. Last week, a retired police officer and longtime neighbor of Webber's claimed to have seen Goodwin at the elderly woman's home hundreds of times in an unmarked police cruiser, according to news reports.

“I want to know how many hours he spent over there — whether this is all recorded," Kathleen Logan, a 20-plus-year resident of Portsmouth, said about Goodwin. "How many taxpayer dollars went to him wooing this woman? Because as far as I'm concerned, he was grooming a vulnerable person just like any kind of a predator does. He was grooming her to take all of her assets. It's disgusting.”

Goodwin, who did not attend Wednesday's meeting, has routinely denied any wrongdoing through his attorney.

Several residents, including Webber's former neighbors, angrily protested to the commission on Wednesday about the city's inaction regarding the embattled sergeant. The face-off comes as Goodwin fights efforts in Rockingham County Probate Court by other heirs, including charitable organizations, which claim Webber did not have “testamentary capacity” to rewrite her will.
Joe Onosko, who lived across the street from Webber for 24 years, commended retired police officer John Connors for speaking publicly about seeing Goodwin at Webber’s home. (Connors was later reprimanded by the department for alleged malfeasance.) Onosko said he has had “a bird’s-eye view of this whole disgusting mess” regarding Webber’s estate.

“There is a lot more to be shared,” Onosko said.

What may not be shared is Webber’s shrinking estate, while it is being fought over in probate court.

“The expense in litigation is so profound in this case that in fact I don’t know who wins when Geraldine Webber’s money will be spent on litigation,” said John Maher, a mediator and retired administrative probate judge.

Maher was appointed by the court to mediate the case. He spoke to most of the people involved and examined all the evidence before brokering the deal that would give Goodwin $425,000.

“I have no dog in this fight,” he said. “I don’t make a finding of right or wrong. As a mediator, I bring the parties together. I try to help them in that regard.”

Maher said he supported an independent investigation into Goodwin, but suggested to residents “the probate court is not the forum.”

With $400,000 in legal expenses already billed from the probate case, the Webber estate is already shrinking.

Only five depositions have been completed so far, Maher said. “There are 17 more depositions to take,” Maher said. “You can use your own sense of that. Add on a week to 10 days of trial.”

Maher acknowledged in an interview after the hearing that it was possible that legal expenses could stop if the parties agreed to stay the case. Meanwhile, commissioners say they do not want the integrity of the city to come at the cost of its so-called inheritance of $800,000. “I think that is selling the reputation of the city pretty low,” Commissioner Gerald Howe said. “And we don’t have it now. It’s found money.”

Commissioner Brenna Cavanaugh said she could not support the settlement based on the public’s concerns over the department’s integrity.

The trial in the probate case is scheduled for January.

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Portsmouth Police Chief Stephen DuBois listens to residents during Wednesday’s police commission meeting.
John Maher, a mediator and retired probate judge, spoke to residents Wednesday about the contested estate of the late Geraldine Webber of Portsmouth.

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