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**Florida House of Representatives
Committee on Claims
SPECIAL MASTER'S FINAL REPORT**

February 18, 1999

SPECIAL MASTER'S FINAL REPORT

The Honorable John Thrasher
Speaker, Florida House of Representatives
420 The Capitol
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1300

Re: HB 525 Representative Eggelation
Relief of Jose Peña and Johammes Peña

THIS IS A VIGOROUSLY CONTESTED, VERDICT-BASED EXCESS JUDGMENT CLAIM FOR \$1,101,061 IN FUNDS OF THE CITY OF HIALEAH TO COMPENSATE JOSE PEÑA AND JOHAMMES PEÑA FOR THE DEATH OF CARMEN MATOS de PEÑA, KATHERINE PEÑA, AND RICHARD PEÑA, AS A RESULT OF THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL NEGLIGENCE OF THE CITY IN MAINTAINING THE SHOULDER OF A CITY ROAD. THE CITY HAS ALREADY PAID THE UNDERLYING \$200,000 WAIVER LIMIT SPECIFIED BY LAW.

FINDINGS OF FACT:

1. **THE CRASH.** Just after dusk on Sunday, October 21, 1990, Carmen Matos de Peña was driving a 1981 Mercury west on West 68th Street in Hialeah. She had a valid Florida learner's permit. Riding in the front seat of the vehicle was Jose Peña, her former husband, who was the registered owner of the vehicle. Their three children, Johammes Peña, age 16; Richard Peña, age 12; and Katherine Peña, age 6, were riding in the back seat. Everyone was wearing a seat belt. The evening was cloudy, the asphalt road was dry, and the area was not lit by street lights.

Near the intersection of West 68th Street and West 26th Drive and for some unknown reason, the car drifted off the right (north) edge of the pavement. At least the two right tires of the car left the paved portion of the roadway. Carmen apparently attempted to steer the vehicle back onto the roadway. It is unclear whether both right tires ever returned to the pavement.

The posted speed limit was 35 m.p.h. Carmen was not exceeding the speed limit.

During these maneuvers, the right rear tire was punctured and blew out. The vehicle veered sharply to the right and traversed a 35-foot wide shoulder and dirt embankment area that dropped steeply to the water-filled east/west canal that ran parallel to the north side of West

68th Street. The vehicle plunged in and sank upright in the water with doors shut and windows up.

Jose and Johammes were extracted from the vehicle. They survived and sustained minor injuries. Although Carmen, Richard and Katherine also were rescued from the vehicle, hospitalized, and placed on life support, none of them survived. Carmen died 8 days after the crash at age 38. Katherine died after 11 days at age 6, and Richard lingered the longest and died after 66 days at age 13.

2. ROADWAY AND SHOULDER. Along the roadway at the scene of the crash there was a 3 to 4 inch drop-off between the paved surface of the roadway and the shoulder area. The city owned, maintained, and controlled the roadway and the shoulder. Even though the city had no formal program for inspecting and maintaining the road shoulders, city personnel were generally aware of this unrepaired drop-off. The city had posted no signs in the area to warn of the drop-off, or of the existence of the adjoining but obscured canal.

There were no pre-existing mechanical defects in the car and no evidence of intoxication or physical impairment of the driver. The traffic homicide investigating officer concluded that the drop-off contributed to the accident, causing the right rear tire to blow out. He identified a scratch mark on the pavement wall where the car attempted to get back on the road and the blowout occurred.

BATTLE OF EXPERTS: Claimants' expert was of the opinion that the city had not properly maintained the shoulder. Contrary to the Florida Department of Transportation Manual of Uniform Minimum Standards for Design, Construction, and Maintenance for Streets and Highways, commonly called the "Green Book," the city had allowed a 3 to 4 inch difference to develop between the surface of the roadway and the shoulder. This created a hazard to the public. Irrespective of the Green Book, the expert was of the opinion the drop-off was hazardous under reasonable and general engineering principles. According to this expert, the drop-off, in conjunction with the jagged edge, was the most probable cause for the blowout. According to him, this was a typical drop-off collision in which the right tires of the vehicle go off the roadway and an overcorrection is made to the left as the driver tries to get the two wheels back onto the pavement. The right rear tire scrubs along the pavement edge. It blows out. The blowout aggravates the situation and forces the car to go back to the right, along with a driver's natural tendency to steer to the right so as not to go into the lane of the oncoming traffic.

Respondent's expert was of the opinion that the damage to the right rear tire illustrated a "rim nip" condition that occurs when the lip of the wheel rim cuts through the tire. According to him, for the rim nip to occur the tire had to be almost flat. He found no tire scrubbing, which would indicate there was no contact with a drop-off. He also pointed out that there was "browning" on the tire, which was indicative of running the tire while under inflated. Given the length of the rim nip, damage adjacent to the tread, damage adjacent to the tire body, and

damage to the rim, he concluded the tire ran over something two inches long while in a deflated condition. It was his opinion that the scratch observed by the traffic homicide investigation officer could not have been caused by the right rear tire. It was further his opinion that the road drop-off did not cause the rim nip in this case. At trial, on cross examination, Respondent's expert ultimately admitted that he had no opinion as to what caused the crash.

3. JOSE PEÑA'S CREDIBILITY. While not relevant to the issue of liability, at the jury trial, on appeal, and at the Special Masters' hearing, the city has vigorously sought to discredit Jose Peña by introducing evidence of his marital and immigration status.

a. Carmen Peña As Jose Peña's "Wife". The following chronology will assist in summarizing this evidence:

<u>DATE</u>	<u>EVENT</u>
11/10/73	Jose married Carmen in Dominican Republic.
1/13/88	Jose divorced Carmen in Dominican Republic.
1/29/88	Jose "married" Patsy Ann Hall in Dade County.
11/25/89	Jose filed a Petition for Dissolution of Marriage to Pasty Ann Hall in Dade County
10/1/90	Final Judgment entered dissolving marriage of Jose and Patsy Ann Hall in Dade County
10/21/90	Crash occurred.
10/29/90	Carmen died.
4/23/96	Jose obtained United States citizenship.

At the jury trial, the city proved that Jose Peña:

- Had filed a notice of claim for life insurance proceeds on the death of Carmen Peña indicating Carmen was his spouse, even though he was not married to her at the time of her death.
- Had claimed Carmen as his wife on his 1989 federal income tax return, even though he was not married to her at that time.
- Had misstated on a marriage license application his number of previous marriages.

b. Jose Peña's Immigration. Mr. Peña admitted that his subsequent marriage to Patsy Ann Hall was a sham. He had never met her, and there was no marriage ceremony. He also admitted that he was attempting to obtain legal residency in the United States; that he paid

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someone \$2,000 to arrange and document a “marriage” and a work permit; and when he went back to find the person to whom he had given the money, the individual was gone and Peña had lost his \$2,000.

Mr. Peña testified he did not get his permanent residency through the marriage to Patsy Ann Hall, but that he qualified for permanent residency through an amnesty program.

STANDARDS FOR FINDINGS OF FACT:

Findings of fact must be supported by a preponderance of evidence. The Special Master may collect, consider, and include in the record, any reasonably believable information that the Special Master finds to be relevant or persuasive in the matter under inquiry. At the Special Master’s level, each claimant has the burden of proof on each required element. However, in the final analysis, this is a legislative measure that, once the Master’s report and recommendation are filed, can be lobbied in the Legislature, just as any other measure can be. Objections to the Special Master’s findings, conclusions, and recommendations can be addressed by either party directly to the members of the Senate, either in committee, or individually, as the parties choose.

LEGAL PROCEEDINGS:

On July 15, 1991, the claimants filed a complaint for damages against the City of Hialeah in the circuit court of the 11th Judicial District (Dade County). The action was for the wrongful death of Carmen, Richard, and Katherine Peña. The case was brought by Jose Peña as Personal Representative and Administrator of the Estates of Carmen, Richard, and Katherine; and Jose Peña individually and as the father of Johammes. On July 13, 1993, Letters of Administration for the estates of Carmen, Richard, and Katherine were issued to Jose Peña. The complaint alleged Jose Peña was the lawful husband of Carmen at the time of the crash.

The case was scheduled to go to trial on October 24, 1994. Several months before trial, respondent’s attorneys discovered that Jose was not married to Carmen at the time of the crash, or at the time of her death. Confronted with these facts, Jose Peña, on advice of his counsel, formally waived any claim he had as legal spouse of Carmen, and also waived his claim for his own bodily injuries, as did Johammes Peña.

The jury’s verdict found negligence on the part of the City of Hialeah that was the legal cause of death of Carmen and the two children. However, the jury compared the negligence of the city with that of Carmen and assigned 75 percent of the liability to the city, 25 percent to Carmen, and none to Jose.

The city appealed to the Third District Court of Appeal which affirmed the case, without opinion.

CLAIMANT’S MAIN ARGUMENTS:

- Mrs. Peña steered off the right side of the roadway for an unknown reason, perhaps to pass cars waiting in front of her to turn left. The shoulder area is designed for

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vehicles to use in such circumstances. This crash scene had a dangerously steep and jagged drop-off which she could not overcome in attempting to return to the road. Her right rear tire blew, the vehicle veered right, she lost control, and the vehicle veered toward and into the canal which resulted in her death and the deaths of her two young children.

- City admitted knowing the area was dangerous and not in compliance with the “Green Book” standards. The Superintendent of the Street Division of the City of Hialeah acknowledged at trial:
 1. That drivers on West 68th Street, a 2-lane road, would come up to the intersection in question. At rush hour, rather than wait for vehicles to turn left off of West 68th Street, westbound drivers were using the right shoulder area to pass to the right of vehicles waiting to turn left;
 2. That the Hialeah Street Division was aware of that circumstance; and
 3. That the use of the shoulder at this location as a driving lane by impatient drivers is what caused the 3 to 4 inch drop-off between the westbound lane and the shoulder area.
- The jury has already “punished” the Peña family by attributing 25 percent of the responsibility for this crash to Carmen Peña.
- The Peñas have been through the court system, including winning the appeal brought by the City of Hialeah which was totally rejected by the appellate court.
- The city is seeking to discredit Jose Peña by introducing evidence of his marital and immigration status. Even if it is assumed that he intentionally lied about his marital status, that would have no effect on whether or not the city was liable.

CITY’S MAIN ARGUMENTS:

- The city agreed that Mrs. Peña drove off the roadway for an unknown reason. It could have been through carelessness when turning around to discipline her children; it could have been an overreaction response to a “phantom vehicle”; or it could have been an illegal and even reckless passing on the right. In any case, she had the last clear chance to avoid the impact into the canal by steering away from it, and she was obviously exceeding the speed limit because she was airborne on her way down the embankment.
- Mr. Peña, the supervising driver, was also at fault--he could have grabbed the wheel and steered the car to safety. Furthermore, he had under-inflated and worn tires on his car that made blowouts more likely.

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- Mr. Peña's testimony (he is the only surviving eye witness to the collision) is not worthy of belief because he has a history of lying under oath. He admitted to an arrogant subversion of the immigration laws of the United States; he recorded a falsely notarized sham marriage license application; he filed a sham divorce; he filed false federal income tax returns; he filed false insurance claims; etc.
- Days after the crash, Mr. Peña returned to the scene, and as an afterthought, while looking for something to blame the collision on, discovered the road-to-shoulder differential and seized it as an excuse to avoid his wife's own responsibility for causing the crash.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW:

Some see the Legislature's role in claim bills against government agencies as merely rubber stamping and "passing through" for payment those jury verdicts that have been reduced to judgment and survived appeal, as this one has. Others see the Legislature's role as a *de novo* responsibility to review, evaluate, and weigh the total circumstances and type of the public entity's liability in the case, and to consider those factors that might not have been perceived by or introduced to the jury or court.

Whichever of these two views each lawmaker holds, at the Special Master's level every claim bill, whether based on a jury verdict or not, must be measured anew against the four standard elements of negligence.

The Florida Supreme Court has determined that in cases like this one, the City of Hialeah had legal responsibility for injuries proximately resulting from dangerous drop-offs at the shoulders of its roads, Manning v. State Department of Transportation, 288 So.2d 289 (Fla.2d DCA, 1974); cert. denied, 295 So.2d 307 (Fla. 1974). Although a city cannot and should not be held liable for highly unusual, extraordinary, or bizarre consequences resulting from a breach of its duty to protect motorists from dangerous conditions, there was nothing highly unusual, extraordinary, or bizarre about Mrs. Peña's maneuver. Furthermore, this is not the first reported case where the City of Hialeah has contested a jury award of money to the family of a driver who ended up in a partially obscured canal where the allegations were that the City of Hialeah had failed to erect barricades or otherwise sufficiently warn motorists of the existence of a partially obstructed canal. In City of Hialeah v. Revels, 123 So.2d 400 (Fla. App. 1960), the Third District Court of Appeal upheld a verdict and a wrongful death Final Judgment based on it against the city's claim that it was excessive.

LIABILITY

From my review of the evidence, I find the city had a duty to maintain the roadway/shoulder area near the scene of the crash. The city breached that duty and that breach was a proximate cause of the crash that resulted in the deaths of claimants' decedents.

DAMAGES

Damages as found by the jury and in the Amended Final Judgment were as follows:

Damages	Jury Award	Amended Final Judgment
Medical and Funeral Expenses: Carmen	\$46,093.38	\$34,570.34 (25% reduction- comparative negligence- Carmen Peña)
Katherine	\$104,527.78	\$78,395.84 (25% reduction- comparative negligence- Carmen Peña)
Richard	\$322,932.87	\$242,199.65 (25% reduction- comparative negligence- Carmen Peña)
Past and Future Loss of Parental Companionship, Instruction, and Guidance and Pain and Suffering by Johammes Peña	\$250,000.00	\$187,500.00 (25% reduction- comparative negligence- Carmen Peña)
Past and Future Pain and Suffering by Jose Peña for: Katherine Peña	\$500,000.00	} \$750,000.00 (25% reduction-comparative negligence- Carmen Peña)
Richard Peña	\$500,000.00	
TOTAL	\$1,723,554.00	1,292,665.53

The Amended Final Judgment also taxed costs against the City in the amount of \$8,395.61. Thus, under the Amended Final Judgment, the total amount awarded to claimants was \$1,301,061.14.

CONCLUSION ON DAMAGES:

The medical and funeral expense portion of the award is clearly supported; however, Cigna Healthcare with a \$424,215 subrogation lien will probably compromise its claim which means that claimants may net a “double recovery” to the extent of Cigna’s discount.

Johammes Peña’s \$187,500 claim for loss of his mother’s companionship and his own pain and suffering is within reason.

Mr. Peña’s \$750,000 claim for pain and suffering over the loss of his two children, Katherine and Richard, is the component of damages that is most under attack by the City of Hialeah. How should the Legislature measure it?

Rather than the subjective, time-worn “shock the conscience” standard used by courts, for purposes of claim bills a respondent who assails a jury verdict as being

excessive should have the burden of showing the Legislature that the verdict was unsupported by any credible evidence; or that it was influenced by corruption, passion, prejudice, or other improper motives; or that it has no reasonable relation to the damages shown; or that it imposes a hardship on the defendant out of proportion to the injuries suffered; or that it obviously and grossly exceeds the maximum limit of a reasonable range within which a jury may properly operate; or that there are post-judgment considerations that were not known at the time of the jury verdict.

For decades, a company called Jury Verdict Research has collected, classified, and analyzed virtually all reported personal injury and wrongful death cases in the United States. Using a formula based on a regression coefficient derived from a correlation analysis of total m e d i c a l expenses, wage loss, and verdicts which have demonstrated a reliable linear relationship, the JVR editors have calculated and reported a probability range of expected verdicts for the death of females having similar age, family, work history, length of unconscious survival prior to death, and loss of services, as that of Carmen Matos de Peña. Based on my review of their data, and allowing for additional subjective variance for the intangible factors that each case presents, the verdict in this case is well within the range of expected verdicts reported by the editors. The awards to Jose for the wrongful death of two of his minor children, adjusted for factors of their age, length of unconscious survival prior to death, and projected loss of services, are also well within the range of expected verdicts for similar cases.

It is my view that because the amount of damage sought by the claimants is 1) within the above standards, and 2) within the range of expected verdicts for this type of case, the total award, already adjusted by the trial court for Mrs. Peña's negligence as assessed by the jury, should be confirmed by the Legislature and the City of Hialeah ordered to pay it.

HISTORY OF THIS CLAIM BILL:

On September 15, 1997, HB 3083, a claims relief bill for Jose and Johammes Pena was filed. On October 16, 1998, the bill was referred to the Civil Justice & Claims Committee. On March 3, 1998, the bill was introduced and referred to the Civil Justice & Claims Committee. On March 4, 1998, the bill was placed on the committee's agenda. On March 11, 1998, the committee unanimously passed the committee substitute (CS). On March 23, 1998, the CS was read the first time and placed on the calendar.

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On April 1, 1998, the CS was placed on the Local Calendar and read a second and third time. The CS passed with 91 Yeas and 23 Nays.

On April 1, 1998, the CS was sent to Senate Messages. On April 15, 1998, the CS was received in Senate Messages and referred to The Special Master on Claims Bills; the Community Affairs Committee; and the Ways and Means Committee. On May 1, 1998, the CS died in Committee on The Special Master on Claims Bills.

**RESPONDENT'S
ABILITY TO PAY:**

The most recent financial statements, including the combined Balance Sheet of the City of Hialeah, prepared by its auditors, Rachlin, Cohen & Holtz, as of September 30, 1997, shows a reserve of \$6,327,766 in the General Fund for "self-insurance claims payable." In their March 24, 1997, letter to the Mayor and City Council, the City Finance Director and City OMB Director concluded that "the City feels that its current Risk Management staff, in a combined effort with the Finance and Law Department staff, using trend studies and history of claims analysis has properly estimated case reserves in the past and can continue to do so in the future." In short, the City of Hialeah has set aside sufficient reserves to pay this claim if ordered to do so.

**ATTORNEYS
FEES:**

Section 768.28(8), F.S., limits claimant's attorneys' fees to 25 percent of claimant's total recovery by way of any judgment or settlement obtained pursuant to §768.28, F.S. Claimants' attorneys have acknowledged this limitation and verified in writing that nothing in excess of 25 percent of the gross recovery will be withheld or paid as attorneys' fees.

RECOMMENDATION:

ACCORDINGLY, I recommend that House Bill 525 be reported FAVORABLY.

Respectfully submitted,

Tonya Sue Chavis, Esq.
House Special Master

cc: Representative Eggelletion
Senator Daryl Jones
D. Stephen Kahn, Senate Special Master