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The Times-Picayune

TP suit seeks records in harassment case

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East Jefferson bureau

The Times-Picayune sued the East Jefferson Levee District on Monday to obtain information regarding claims made by three former Levee District employees that the district's previous executive director sexually harassed them. Included in the information sought is how much money was paid to settle the allegations.

The newspaper's suit says one of its reporters, Manuel Torres, sought the information in a public records request to the Levee District on June 16. The district responded that it did not pay the plaintiffs to settle. If any money was paid, Levee District officials stated, it was by the district's liability insurer. The district did not release any records.

The paper's suit says records of the settlement are public documents and the Levee District is the "custodian" of the records as defined in Louisiana's Public Records Act.

The dispute stems from the tenure of Alan Francingues, the Levee District's executive director for four years. He resigned in 2000.

Employees Yvette Boue, Pamela Courville and Royce Payne sued the Levee District on Feb. 13, 2002, alleging Francingues had sexually harassed them. The Levee District settled the suit, and U.S. District Judge Helen "Ginger" Berrigan dismissed it March 26, 2003.

The newspaper filed its suit in 24th District Court in Gretna.

The Levee District's president, Ron Zibilich, would not comment on the newspaper's suit. But attorney Pauline Hardin, who defended the Levee District in the harassment suit, released a statement that the settlement contained confidentiality agreements.

Hardin further stated that the Levee District and the three former employees offered to give the settlement agreements to the newspaper, but would not release personal information that could invade the individuals' privacy if published.

Lori Mince, an attorney for the newspaper, said the Levee District would release the settlement agreement only if the newspaper waived its right to seek further information in public records. The paper declined, she said.