



Fired Chief Awarded \$3.1 Million

Former Top Police Official Blew the Whistle in Leesburg Credit Card Scandal

Maria Glod Washington Post Staff Writer
December 16, 2000; Page B1

A federal jury awarded former Leesburg police chief Keith A. Stiles \$3.1 million after finding that he was fired for blowing the whistle on a credit card scandal that ended in the resignations of two town officials. "When the verdict was read, I had emotions of graciousness and gratitude sweep over me," Stiles, 48, said yesterday. "It was a moment of healing that we've been waiting for for almost two years."

Legal experts said the jury award was unusually high for a whistle-blower case in a small town -- especially because Stiles had asked for less than \$1 million.

Stiles was fired in April 1999 after a nearly 25-year career in law enforcement, including four as chief in the Loudoun County town. His termination came weeks after he was publicly revealed as the informant who sparked a Virginia State Police investigation into whether two town officials had charged personal expenses to Leesburg's American Express account.

The four-day trial in U.S. District Court in Alexandria ended Thursday night when jurors awarded a amount far higher than the \$950,000 Stiles had sought. The jury arrived at damages of \$3 million from the town and \$100,000 from Finance Director Paul E. York, who as acting town manager had made the decision to fire Stiles.

Town Manager Robert S. Noe Jr. issued a statement yesterday saying that he stands behind York's decision and that the firing was "appropriate based on the circumstances existing in the town police department." Town officials have said Stiles ordered too many internal investigations, which resulted in low morale and high turnover.

"Mr. York continues to enjoy my full support and that of a strong majority of the Town Council," Noe said. Officials said they are considering appealing the case.

Jamin Raskin, an American University constitutional law professor, said whistle-blower cases are fairly common, but the award was high. "There are a lot of instances where a public employee is fired for speech considered treasonous by the hiring authority," Raskin said. "Juries . . . can tell the difference between a good employee and a bad one."

During three days of testimony, council members, prosecutors and police officers provided the first behind-the-scenes look at the so-called "credit card scandal" that was the talk of Leesburg in spring 1999.

The investigation had begun that January when Stiles went to prosecutors after Town Clerk Barbara Markland -- now his wife -- told him about rumors circulating around town hall. Markland testified she heard that former town manager Steve Brown and then-council member Joseph R. Trocino had charged personal expenses on the town credit card.

A criminal investigation, which included the seizure of credit card statements at Town Hall, ended in March 1999 without any charges. Brown and Trocino agreed to resign in an agreement with prosecutors to drop the charges. Both said they had reimbursed the town after charging personal items.

Vice Mayor Kristen C. Umstatt, one of two council members who voted against the firing, testified that other officials were upset that Stiles had reported his suspicions. "There was no place for anyone who would go outside the system of town government," she said.

Stiles, who has been turned down for jobs by about 100 law enforcement agencies, worked for Federal Express delivering packages and in October got a job with the Justice Department.

Some residents said yesterday that their former chief may have had a case but that the jury went overboard with the verdict. They also had cool words for town leaders.

"Some of the verdicts in these kinds of cases really floor me sometimes. . . . It's a black mark against the town, that's for sure," said Jim Pumphrey, co-owner of Jock's Exxon in Leesburg. "It was a sad situation for the whole town. I was sorry to see any of it."

After the flap, the Town Council passed a policy prohibiting personal use of town cards. The council also -- as part of the agreement with prosecutors -- strengthened its protection of whistle-blowers.

"I was dumbfounded when he was fired," said Loudoun's deputy commonwealth's attorney, Owen D. Basham, who handled the credit card case. "I thought he would be hailed as a hero when he showed such courage and integrity."

Staff writer Michael Laris contributed to this report.

[Return to Search Results](#)

washingtonpost.com

NEWS

STYLE

SPORTS

CLASSIFIEDS

MARKETPLACE