## IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS, FRANKLIN COUNTY, OHIO GENERAL DIVISION

Charles Earl,		]	Case No. 15CV-05973
	Appellant,	]	Judge Sheeran
vs.		]	
Ohio Elections Commission,		]	
	Appellee.	]	

# <u>Decision and Judgment Entry Dismissing Revised Code 119.12 Administrative</u> Appeal for Lack of Subject-Matter Jurisdiction

#### and

### **Notice of Final Appealable Order**

### Sheeran, J.

This case is a Revised Code 119.12 administrative appeal by Charles Earl (Appellant) from an Order issued by the Ohio Elections Commission on June 30, 2015. In that Order, the Commission dismissed a complaint that Appellant had filed with the Commission, alleging that several individuals and one entity had violated Ohio election law. The record that the Commission has certified to the Court reflects the following facts and procedural history.

### **Facts and Procedural History**

Appellant was the Libertarian Party candidate for Ohio Governor in 2014. In February 2014, Gregory Felsoci, also a member of the Libertarian Party, filed a protest with the Ohio Secretary of State, opposing the certification of Appellant's candidacy. Mr. Felsoci alleged that the signatures on Appellant's nominating petitions had been improperly collected.

A Hearing Officer conducted a hearing on Mr. Felsoci's protest and then reported to the Secretary of State that some of the signatures on Appellant's nominating petitions were invalid. In March 2014, the Secretary of State adopted the Hearing Officer's report and upheld Mr. Felsoci's protest of Appellant's candidacy.

As a result of the Secretary of State's decision, Appellant did not have enough valid signatures to be nominated as the Libertarian Party candidate for Governor, and the Secretary of State removed Appellant's name from the May 2014 primary ballot. There were no other Libertarian Party candidates for Governor in 2014.

In the November 2014 general election, the Republican Party candidates, John Kasich and Mary Taylor, were elected Governor and Lieutenant Governor, over the Democratic Party candidates, Ed FitzGerald and Sharen Neuhardt, and the Green Party candidates, Anita Rios and Bob Fitrakis.

On April 15, 2015, Appellant filed a complaint with the Ohio Elections Commission, naming as respondents Governor Kasich, Lieutenant Governor Taylor, Kasich/Taylor for Ohio (Kasich/Taylor Campaign), Terry Casey, Matt Carle, Jeff Polesovsky, and Dave Luketic (collectively Respondents). Appellant alleged that Respondents had acted in concert to have Appellant removed from the primary ballot in May 2014 and that, in the course of such conduct, Respondents had violated Ohio election law. Specifically, Appellant alleged that Mr. Casey had made an in-kind contribution to the Kasich/Taylor Campaign that was not properly reported, by arranging for third parties to pay the attorney fees incurred in connection with Mr. Felsoci's protest of Appellant's candidacy.

By letter dated April 17, 2015, the Commission notified Appellant:

The Ohio Elections Commission has received your complaint alleging violations of election law pursuant to the Ohio Revised Code:

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§3517.092 (Prohibited Solicitation of Campaign Contributions)

§3517.10(A) & (B) (Failure to File Complete and Accurate Statements)

§3517.102(B)(1) (Exceeding Contribution Limits)

§3517.13(A) (Failure to File a Complete and Accurate Statement)

§3517.13(G) (Concealment and/or Misrepresentation of Contributions and/or Expenditures)

Your case has been scheduled for preliminary review at 10:00 A.M. on May 21, 2015 \*\*\*.

At the preliminary review, the Commission will review all timely filed documents submitted. After reviewing the documents, the Commission may do one of the following:

- 1. Find there has been no violation;
- 2. Find there has been a violation; or
- 3. Set the matter for a hearing at a later date if the Commission desires to receive further testimony.

Following the preliminary review, the commission will notify you of the disposition.

You are welcome to attend and observe the preliminary review. However, it is within the discretion of the Commission to allow any statements or presentation of any evidence at that time.

On May 8, 2015, Respondents moved the Commission to dismiss Appellant's complaint. Respondents asserted that Appellant's complaint was deficient as a matter of law and failed to set forth even a prima facie case that Respondents had violated Ohio election law. Appellant opposed the motions to dismiss.

On May 21, 2015, the Commission conducted its preliminary review of Appellant's complaint. The attorneys for Appellant and Respondents attended the preliminary review. The Commission did not receive evidence or take testimony. The Commission heard argument from the attorneys, and the attorneys answered questions posed by the Commission. At the conclusion of the preliminary review, the Commission voted to dismiss Appellant's complaint.

In an "Order of the Ohio Elections Commission" mailed to Appellant and Respondents on June 30, 2015, the Commission stated:

On 5/21/2015 after careful consideration of the evidence, the Ohio Elections Commission adopted the following finding(s) in the above referenced matter:

THE COMMISSION GRANTED THE MOTION TO DISMISS THE MATTER.

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It is hereby certified that the foregoing is a true and exact reproduction of the original Order of the Ohio Elections Commission for this case as entered on its journal.

On July 8, 2015, Appellant filed a "Petition for Reconsideration" with the Commission, requesting that the Commission reconsider its dismissal of Appellant's complaint. The Petition was denied.

On July 14, 2015, Appellant appealed the Commission's June 30, 2015 dismissal Order to this Court pursuant to R.C. 3517.157(D) and R.C. 119.12.

The Commission has moved the Court to dismiss this appeal for lack of subject matter jurisdiction. Appellant has opposed the motion. For the following reasons, the Commission's motion is well taken and must be granted.

#### <u>Law</u>

The Ohio Elections Commission's preliminary review process is governed by Ohio Adm. Code 3517-1-11(A), which provides:

3517-1-11 Preliminary review \*\*\*.

(A) Preliminary review.

All cases not subject to the provisions of rule 3517-1-10 of the Administrative Code [expedited hearings] shall be subject to the following provisions. A preliminary review of the allegations shall be held by a probable cause panel or the full commission \*\*\*. At the preliminary review stage, the body hearing

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the case shall review all pleadings, evidence, and motions before it to determine jurisdiction, sufficiency of the complaint, and whether probable cause exists for the full commission to determine whether a violation of Ohio election law has occurred.

- (1) At the preliminary review stage of the proceedings, the body hearing the case shall not hear arguments, receive evidence or take testimony unless:
  - (a) All parties \*\*\* have filed a stipulation agreeing to such procedure and a majority of members present, in their sole discretion, agree to do so; or
  - (b) Any member wishes to request specific information which will aid in a proper determination of the matter at the preliminary review stage.

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# (3) If the preliminary review is held before the full commission, the commission may:

- (a) Continue the preliminary review for good cause shown; or
- (b) Amend the complaint or referral, sua sponte, to include additional parties and/or allegations and continue the preliminary review to permit proper joinder and notice pursuant to these rules, if it finds additional apparent violations sufficiently alleged against any party or other person; or
- (c) Request that an investigatory attorney be appointed, if it finds that the evidence is insufficient but that further review is necessary. \*\*\* If such request is made, the panel shall also refer the matter for a timely hearing before the full commission.
- (d) Set the matter for a hearing by the full commission, if it finds that a significant factual dispute exists or there is uncertainty as to a material fact necessary to determine whether there is a violation, as to any or all of the allegations; or
- (e) Make a final disposition in the case and do one of the following:
  - (i) Dismiss the case, or any part thereof, upon request of the complainant, or if commission jurisdiction,

### sufficiency of the complaint, or probable cause are not found; or

- (ii) Find good cause not to impose a fine or refer the matter for prosecution; or
- (iii) Impose a penalty \*\*\*; or
- (iv) Refer the matter to the appropriate prosecuting attorney \*\*\*. (Emphasis added.)

Revised Code 3517.157(D) provides that "[a] party adversely affected by a final determination of the commission may appeal from the determination under section 119.12 of the Revised Code." Revised Code 119.12 provides:

§ 119.12 Appeal by party adversely affected - notice - record - hearing - judgment.

(A)(1) \*\*\* [A]ny party adversely affected by an order of an agency issued pursuant to an adjudication denying an applicant admission to an examination, or denying the issuance or renewal of a license or registration of a license, or revoking or suspending a license, or allowing the payment of a forfeiture under section 4301.252 of the Revised Code may appeal from the order of the agency to the court of common pleas of the county in which the place of business of the licensee is located or the county in which the licensee is a resident.

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(B) Any party adversely affected by any order of an agency issued pursuant to any other adjudication may appeal to the court of common pleas of Franklin county \*\*\*. (Emphasis added.)

"Party" means "the person whose interests are the subject of an adjudication by an agency." R.C. 119.01(G). "Adjudication" means "the determination by the highest or ultimate authority of an agency of the rights, duties, privileges, benefits, or legal relationships of a specified person, but does not include the issuance of a license in response to an application with respect to which no question is raised, nor other acts of a ministerial nature." R.C. 119.01(D).

Revised Code 119.12 allows appeals only from orders issued pursuant to an "adjudication." *Estep v. Ohio Dept. of Job and Family Servs.*, 10th Dist. Nos. 12AP-438 and 12AP-490, 2013-Ohio-82, ¶ 15. In the absence of an "adjudication" as defined by R.C. 119.01(D), common pleas courts lack jurisdiction to review an agency's decision. *Id.*, citing *Springfield Fireworks, Inc. v. Ohio Dept. of Commerce, Div. of State Fire Marshal*, 10th Dist. No. 03AP-330, 2003-Ohio-6940, ¶ 25.

The Tenth District Court of Appeals has repeatedly held that a complainant has no right to appeal from the Ohio Elections Commission's determination that a complaint lacks probable cause. See, *Robinson v. Ohio Elections Comm.*, 10th Dist. No. 04AP-495, 2004-Ohio-6452, ¶ 11; *State ex rel. Common Cause/Ohio v. Ohio Elections Comm.*, 156 Ohio App. 3d 544, 2004-Ohio-1594, ¶¶ 14-15 (10th Dist.) ("Common Cause 2"); *Common Cause/Ohio v. Ohio Elections Comm.*, 150 Ohio App. 3d 31, 2002-Ohio-5965, ¶ 10 (10th Dist.) ("Common Cause 1"); and *Billis v. Ohio Elections Comm.*, 10th Dist. No. 01AP-314, 146 Ohio App. 3d 360, 362-364 (2001).

In Billis v. Ohio Elections Comm., supra, the Tenth District Court of Appeals held:

There is no inherent right to appeal from an action of an administrative agency absent constitutional or statutory authority. *State ex rel. Citizens for Van Meter v. Ohio Elections Comm.* (1992), 78 Ohio App. 3d 289, 292, 604 N.E. 2d 775. R.C. 3517.157(D) provides: "A party adversely affected by a final determination of the commission may appeal from the determination under section 119.12 of the Revised Code." It is undisputed that appellant is a party, as Ohio Adm. Code 3517-1-08(A) indicates that complainants are parties. However, our review of the record indicates that there was no final determination that would trigger an appeal right under R.C. 3517.17(D).

The procedure for a preliminary review by a probable cause panel or the full commission is delineated in Ohio Adm. Code 3517-1-11(A). Under this section, the body conducting the review is directed to "review all pleadings, evidence, and motions before it to determine jurisdiction, sufficiency of the complaint, and whether probable cause exists for the full commission to determine whether a violation of Ohio election law has occurred." Ohio Adm. Code 3517-1-11(A).

No argument, evidence, or testimony is to be entertained at the preliminary review stage without stipulation of the parties ratified by the commission or without the request by a commission member. Ohio Adm. Code 3517-1-11(A)(1)(a) and (b). When the preliminary review is conducted by the full commission, the commission is empowered to dismiss the case if jurisdiction, sufficiency of the complaint, or probable cause is lacking. Ohio Adm. Code 3517-1-11(A)(2)(e)(i). A majority vote is required for the commission to take any action. R.C. 3517.152(G)(3).

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In *Van Meter* at 294, 604 N.E. 2d 775, this court explained the limited right to appeal from an action of appellee:

"The general lack of any appeal from commission decisions makes sense because, by and large, the commission acts in an investigatory capacity, much like a prosecutor or grand jury. See *Dewine v. Ohio Elections Comm.* (1978), 61 Ohio App. 2d 25, 15 Ohio Op. 3d 28, 399 N.E. 2d 99. Typically, when an agency conducts such investigations and does not find a violation of the law, this determination is not subject to any judicial review because it is not an adjudication. *Ohio Assn. of Pub. School Emp., Chapter 643, AFSCME, AFL-CIO v. Dayton City School Dist. Bd. of Edn.* (1991), 59 Ohio St. 3d 159, 572 N.E. 2d 80; *Hanson v. Fabe*, 1991 Ohio App. LEXIS 6013 (Dec. 10, 1991), Franklin App. No. 91AP-435, unreported, 1991 WL 268739. \*\*\*"

While the General Assembly has altered the legislative scheme creating the Ohio Elections Commission since this court's decision in *Van Meter*, the same reasoning applies to the current statutory scheme. As appellee argues, there is no provision for anyone to appeal from an action of the commission dismissing a complaint for lack of probable cause because such a dismissal is not an adjudication.

In *Goldberger v. Weiler* (Aug. 3. 1999), Franklin App. No. 98AP-1097, unreported 1999 WL 561678, this court concluded that there was no right to appeal from an order of the Ohio Real Estate Commission finding no violation of real estate laws and taking no further action on a complaint. This court stated:

"\*\*\* The order that appellant seeks to appeal to the court of common pleas did not determine the rights, duties, privileges, or legal relationships of anyone. Rather, the order is simply a determination by the commission that insufficient evidence of a violation of Ohio's real estate laws exists to justify proceeding to an adjudication, which would determine the parties' rights, duties, privileges, or legal relationships. See *Barron v. State* (Dec. 2, 1980), Franklin App. No. 80AP-470, unreported (1980 Opinions 3668) (holding that an order of the Ohio Motor Vehicle Dealers Board refusing to proceed further on a complaint did not determine rights, duties, privileges, or legal relationships of any person and was therefore not issued pursuant to an adjudication).

"The commission's determination not to proceed further with appellant's complaint is akin to the decision of a county prosecutor not to seek an indictment based on a citizen's report of a crime. Boieru v. State Emp. Relations Bd. (1988), 54 Ohio App. 3d 23, 27, 560 N.E. 2d 801; Barron, supra. In both cases, the decision not to proceed is an executive rather than an adjudicative decision, and is consequently not appealable. Boieru, supra."

Here, as in *Goldberger*, the dismissal was merely an executive decision and not an adjudication from which an appeal lies. (Emphasis added.)

In Common Cause 1, supra, the Tenth District Court of Appeals held:

In *Billis*, *supra*, this court addressed whether the commission's dismissal of an action after a finding of no probable cause gave rise to a right of appeal. Upon a review of the relevant statutes, this court held that it did not, because **at the preliminary review stage of the proceedings the commission is only to review the pleadings, evidence and motions to determine jurisdiction, sufficiency of the complaint, and whether probable cause exists. At that stage, the commission is acting in an executive, rather than in an adjudicative, function, and because a dismissal based on lack of probable cause is not an adjudication there is no provision for appeal.** *Id.***, citing** *State ex rel. Citizens for Van Meter v. Ohio Elections Comm.* **(1992), 78 Ohio App. 3d 289, 294. (Emphasis added.)** 

In Common Cause 2, supra, the Tenth District Court of Appeals held:

This court addressed the function of the commission in *Dewine v. Ohio Elections Comm.* (1978), 61 Ohio App. 2d 25, 31. The court stated:

"\*\*\* [T]he function of the Ohio Elections Commission appears to be somewhat similar to that of a grand jury in felony cases. A prosecution cannot be commenced by merely filing a complaint with the court; rather, there must first be a preliminary determination by the Ohio Elections Commission as to whether a violation has occurred.

"\*\*\* The action by the Ohio Elections Commission is a preliminary to the commencement of a prosecution. Any finding of a violation by the commission must be forwarded to the county prosecutor, who in turn must initiate any criminal prosecution that may ensue. A full opportunity to defend in such prosecution is afforded the alleged violator.

"The purpose of this provision is to prevent the promiscuous filing of criminal charges in court during the heat of a political campaign, requiring instead that a preliminary determination

be made by the Ohio Elections Commission prior to the commencement of any prosecution. Additional protection is afforded the alleged violator since the commission may not proceed merely upon probable cause \*\*\*. Although the requirement of preliminary findings by the Ohio Elections Commission prior to the commencement of a prosecution may constitute a somewhat unusual procedure, the powers conferred upon the Ohio Elections Commission are not judicial powers but are more akin to the powers conferred upon a prosecutor in determining whether to proceed with the prosecution of an alleged violation of law. \*\*\*" Id., 61 Ohio App. 2d at 31; Van Meter, supra, 78 Ohio App. 3d at 294 ("The general lack of any appeal from commission decisions makes sense because, by and large, the commission acts in an investigatory capacity, much like a prosecutor or grand jury.").

The commission's main purpose then is similar to that of a prosecutor, to consider complaints and weed out those lacking probable cause. *Id.* At this preliminary review stage, the commission is acting in an executive rather than adjudicative function. *Billis*, supra; *Common Cause 1*, supra. If the commission finds that a complaint lacks probable cause at this preliminary review stage, there is no right of appeal. *Common Cause 1*, supra. If a complaining party were afforded a right of appeal from the commission's finding of no probable cause, it would obviate one of the purposes served by the commission, that is, to screen away from the courts those matters that lack the requisite degree of probability to warrant the court's attention. (Emphasis added.)

In Robinson v. Ohio Elections Comm., supra, the Tenth District Court of Appeals held:

This court has held a complainant has no right to appeal from the commission's determination that a complaint lacks probable cause. Id.; Common Cause/Ohio v. Ohio Elections Comm., 150 Ohio App. 3d 31, 35, 2002-Ohio-5965. In Common Cause we reiterated the reasoning of Billis and Van Meter, stating a finding of no probable cause did not give rise to a right of appeal "because at the preliminary review stage of the proceedings the commission is to review only the pleadings, evidence, and motions to determine jurisdiction, sufficiency of the complaint, and whether probable cause exists. At that stage, the commission is acting in an executive, rather than in an adjudicative, function, and because a dismissal based on lack of probable cause is not an adjudication there is no provision for appeal." Id. at 35, citing Billis, Van Meter, supra. (Emphasis added.)

The law is clear: A complainant has no right to appeal an order of the Ohio Elections Commission dismissing a complaint for lack of probable cause, because such an order is not an "adjudication" that may be appealed pursuant to R.C. 119.12(B).

#### **Analysis**

The Commission has moved the Court to dismiss this R.C. 119.12 administrative appeal for lack of subject matter jurisdiction. The Commission argues that, based upon the case law cited above, Appellant has no right to appeal the Commission's dismissal of Appellant's complaint for lack of probable cause. Appellant has asserted, in opposition to the motion to dismiss, that the Commission's dismissal Order was not actually a dismissal for lack of probable cause but was, instead, a determination of the merits of Appellant's complaint and therefore appealable. Appellant's assertion, however, is absolutely refuted by the record.

The purpose of a preliminary review is "to determine jurisdiction, sufficiency of the complaint, and whether probable cause exists for the full commission to determine whether a violation of Ohio election law has occurred." Ohio Adm. Code 3517-1-11(A). At the preliminary review stage, that is the only task to be accomplished by the body conducting the preliminary review, whether that body is a probable-cause panel or the full Commission. When the preliminary review is conducted by the full Commission, as was done in this case, the Commission is empowered to dismiss the case "if commission jurisdiction, sufficiency of the complaint, or probable cause are not found[.]" Ohio Adm. Code 3517-1-11(A)(3)(e)(i).

The record that the Commission has certified to the Court demonstrates that the procedures established by Ohio Adm. Code 3517-1-11(A) were followed by the Commission when it conducted its preliminary review of Appellant's complaint on May 21, 2015. *Transcript, Earl v. Casev, May 21, 2015 (T.) pp. 1-77.* No evidence was received and no testimony was

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taken. At the invitation of the Commission, the attorneys for Appellant and Respondents presented oral argument and answered questions posed by the Commission. *T. pp. 1-72*. The Commission then voted to dismiss Appellant's complaint. *T. pp. 72-76*.

Appellant contends that, because the Commission's June 30, 2015 dismissal Order did not expressly state that Appellant's complaint was being dismissed "for lack of probable cause," it was not a "probable cause" dismissal. However, the oral argument made by Appellant's own attorney, at the preliminary review, demonstrates that the issue being determined by the Commission at the preliminary review was, indeed, whether there was probable cause to believe that a violation of Ohio election law had occurred.

At the preliminary review on May 21, 2015, Appellant's attorney made the following statements to the Commission:

[By Mr. Brown:]

\*\*\* The factual **issue is whether there is probable cause** to believe that the [Kasich] Campaign and Terry Casey coordinated their activities to protest Charlie Earl.

\*\*\*

**So the question here** is a factual issue only of whether there was either consent by the [Kasich] Campaign for coordination in Casey's efforts by the [Kasich] Campaign, **whether there is probable cause** to believe that.

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\*\*\* But again, my understanding is **you're looking for probable cause at this stage**. \*\*\* But at bear [sic] minimum, there is **probable cause** to further investigate. T. pp. 28, 30, 37. (Emphasis added.)

As a matter of law, specifically Ohio Adm. Code 3517-1-11(A), there were only three possible issues for the Commission to determine at the preliminary review on May 21, 2015: the Commission's jurisdiction; the sufficiency of Appellant's complaint; and whether there was

probable cause to believe that a violation of Ohio election law had occurred. As acknowledged by Appellant's attorney at the preliminary review, the issue before the Commission was, indeed, whether there was probable cause to believe that a violation of Ohio election law had occurred. The Commission determined that probable cause was lacking and therefore voted to dismiss Appellant's complaint.

### Conclusion

Subject-matter jurisdiction refers to the statutory or constitutional power of a court to hear a case. *Nkanginieme v. Ohio Dept. of Medicaid*, 10th Dist. No. 14AP-596, 2015-Ohio-656, ¶ 15. In the context of administrative appeals, common pleas courts have only "such powers of review of proceedings of administrative officers and agencies as may be provided by law." *Clifton Care Center v. Ohio Dept. of Job and Family Servs.*, 10th Dist. No. 12AP-709, 2013-Ohio-2742, ¶ 9, quoting Ohio Const., Art. IV, Section 4(B). "The right to appeal an administrative decision is neither inherent nor inalienable; to the contrary, it must be conferred by statute." *Midwest Fireworks Mfg. Co. v. Deerfield Twp. Bd. of Zoning Appeals*, 91 Ohio St. 3d 174, 177 (2001).

The Court concludes that it lacks jurisdiction over the subject matter of this appeal. Appellant has no right to appeal the Ohio Elections Commission's June 30, 2015 Order dismissing Appellant's complaint for lack of probable cause. The "Ohio Elections Commission's Motion to Dismiss," filed on August 25, 2015, is therefore **GRANTED**, and this case is hereby **DISMISSED** for lack of subject matter jurisdiction.

The "Motion of Appellee Terry Casey to Dismiss Appeal," filed on July 24, 2015, and "Plaintiff's Motion to Strike Mr. Casey's Filing," filed on August 7, 2015, have been rendered **MOOT**.

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This is a final, appealable Order. Costs to Appellant. Pursuant to Civ. R. 58, the Franklin County Clerk of Courts shall serve notice of this judgment and its date of entry upon all parties.

Copies electronically transmitted to all counsel of record.

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### Franklin County Court of Common Pleas

**Date:** 02-29-2016

Case Title: CHARLES EARL -VS- OHIO ELECTIONS COMMISSION

**Case Number:** 15CV005973

**Type:** DECISION/ENTRY

It Is So Ordered.

/s/ Judge Patrick E. Sheeran

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### **Court Disposition**

Case Number: 15CV005973

Case Style: CHARLES EARL -VS- OHIO ELECTIONS COMMISSION

Case Terminated: 18 - Other Terminations

Final Appealable Order: Yes

Motion Tie Off Information:

1. Motion CMS Document Id: 15CV0059732015-08-2599980000

Document Title: 08-25-2015-MOTION TO DISMISS -

**DEFENDANT: OHIO ELECTIONS COMMISSION** 

Disposition: MOTION GRANTED

Motion CMS Document Id: 15CV0059732015-08-0799980000
 Document Title: 08-07-2015-MOTION TO STRIKE - PLAINTIFF:

CHARLES EARL

Disposition: MOTION IS MOOT

Motion CMS Document Id: 15CV0059732015-07-2499970000
 Document Title: 07-24-2015-MOTION TO DISMISS - NON-

PARTY: TERRY CASEY

Disposition: MOTION IS MOOT