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9th former Robert Ficano appointee sues over job loss

By John Wisley
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A ninth former appointee of Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano has sued, claiming he was fired after uncovering violations of state and federal law in the way the county spends road money.

Stephen MacDonald, a certified public accountant, says he was let go in January because his internal audits showed "gross mismanagement of taxpayer funds and excessive deficit spending."

"He was asked to do a job, he did it very well -- too well," said his lawyer Stephen King.

Ficano spokeswoman Brooke Blackwell said MacDonald was let go to save money.

"This suit was filed by a former at-will employee who was laid off with a group of 12 others on Jan. 9, as part of a cost-saving measure to help bring the county's budget in balance," Blackwell said. "We intend to defend the county against this kind of manufactured lawsuit from someone who is clearly out for personal gain."

King was laid off from his \$123,000-a-year senior executive job on Jan. 9 along with 56 other county employees that included a dozen other Ficano appointees. Ficano said the moves were part of a cost-cutting plan, but MacDonald charges in his suit that he had already more than paid for himself through cost savings he identified.

Shortly after joining the county in March 2011, according to his suit, MacDonald found that the county hadn't been properly billing local governments for \$1.6 million in roadwork.

"With this one project in April 2011, MacDonald had helped the county recoup approximately \$1.6 million in previously unbilled revenues. This amount was more than 10 times MacDonald's annual salary," the suit says.

King said MacDonald also found the county to be violating state and federal laws governing the expenditure of road money. He also found that the county had overspent on road engineering projects, including \$43 million in engineering costs to complete \$96 million in road contracts.

After submitting that report, Ficano's then-chief of staff, Matthew Schenk, "instructed MacDonald to focus his efforts elsewhere," the suit said.

He was later let go for his reports that "shed light on the fact that the county was violating state and federal laws, that there were serious internal accounting irregularities at the county, gross mismanagement of taxpayer funds and corruption," the suit said.

Six other Ficano appointees won their lawsuit last month seeking severance payments promised by Ficano. Two other appointees -- Azzam Elder and Sheri Galofaro-Mendez -- have suits pending against the county.

Ficano's administration has been embroiled in scandal since September, when he acknowledged that he paid a \$200,000 severance to former economic development director Turkia Awada Mullin after she voluntarily resigned to take a job at Detroit Metro Airport.