# The Supreme Court of South Carolina

RE: Operation of the Trial Courts During the Coronavirus Emergency (As Amended December 16, 2020)[1]

Appellate Case No. 2020-000447

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ORDER

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**(a) Purpose.** The purpose of this order is to provide guidance on the continued operation of the trial courts during the current coronavirus (COVID-19) emergency. The measures contained in this order are intended to allow essential operations to continue while minimizing the risk to the public, litigants, lawyers and court employees.

In the past, the South Carolina Judicial Branch has shown great resilience in responding to hurricanes, floods, and other major disasters, and this Court is confident that the same will be true in this emergency. This emergency, however, differs from these prior emergencies in many aspects. The current emergency will significantly impact every community in South Carolina while the prior emergencies, although potentially horrific for the individuals and communities directly impacted, did not. The impact of the prior emergencies could be minimized or avoided by traveling away from the site of the disaster; this is not the case for the current emergency. Further, in the prior emergencies, the circumstances giving rise to the emergency involved a single event with a beginning and a predictable end. This is not the case for the coronavirus, and even conservative estimates indicate the direct impacts of this pandemic will continue

[1] This order was initially filed on April 3, 2020, and has been amended three times. On April 14, 2020, changes were made to sections (c)(5) and (c)(8). On April 22, 2020, section (c)(17) was added. This latest order amends sections (c)(1), (c)(2) (c)(3), (c)(4), (c)(6), (c)(8), (c)(9), (d)(2), (d)(3), (f)(1)(C), (h)(1), (h)(2), (h)(3), and (i), and added new sections (c)(11)(D), (c)(18), (f)(4) and (i)(3).

for many months.

In light of the extraordinary challenges presented by the current emergency, this Court finds it necessary to supplement and, in some situations, to alter significantly, the current practices regarding the operation of the trial courts. In the event of a conflict between this order and the South Carolina Rules of Civil Procedure (SCRCP), the South Carolina Rules of Criminal Procedure (SCRCrimP), the South Carolina Rules of Family Court (SCRFC), the South Carolina Rules of Probate Court (SCRPC), the South Carolina Rules of Magistrates Court (SCRMC), the South Carolina Court-Annexed Alternative Dispute Resolution Rules (SCADR), South Carolina Rules of Evidence (SCRE) or any other rule or administrative order regarding the operation of a trial court, this order shall control.

**(b) Terminology**. The following terminology is used in this order.

**(1) Judge:** a judge of the circuit court, family court, probate court, magistrate court and municipal court, including masters-in-equity and special referees.

**(2) Remote Communication Technology:** technology such as video conferencing and teleconferencing which allows audio and/or video to be shared at differing locations in real time.

**(3) Summary Court:** the magistrate and municipal courts.

**(4) Trial Court:** the circuit court (including masters-in-equity court), family court, probate court, magistrate court and municipal court.

**(c) General Guidance.** This section provides general guidance applicable to all trial courts or to several court types, and later sections will provide guidance that is limited to one court type. While this order remains in effect, the following general guidance shall apply:

**(1) Jury Trials.** If done in accordance with a plan approved by the Chief Justice,[2] jury selections and jury trials may be conducted. These plans

[2] To obtain approval of a plan, the plan should be submitted to the Office of Court Administration. Since the plan will have to address courtroom and other facility

should adhere to the guidance contained in section (c)(3) below.

**(2) Non-Jury Trials and Hearings.** Subject to the guidance provided in section (c)(3) below, non-jury trials and hearings may be conducted.

**(3) General Guidance Regarding Trials and Hearings.**

**(A) Remote Non-Jury Trials and Hearings.** Except as may be restricted by any constitutional provision, statutory provision or other provision of this order, a non-jury trial or a hearing on a motion or other matter, including a first appearance in a criminal case, may be conducted using remote communication technology to avoid the need for a physical appearance by any party, witness or counsel.

**(B) In-Person Trials and Hearings.**[3] An in-person trial or hearing may be conducted if a judge determines (1) it is appropriate to conduct an in-person trial or hearing and (2) the trial or hearing can be safely be conducted. If an in-person trial or hearing is held, the following will apply:

**(i)** Start and end times for trials and hearings must be staggered to minimize the number of persons who will be present at the same time in the courtroom or hearing room, and

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specific information, a separate plan will need to be submitted for the circuit court in each county. Further, a separate plan will need to be submitted by each magistrate, municipal and probate court. Court Administration should be contacted to obtain additional advice and assistance regarding the content and requirements that should be addressed in any plan.

[3] The guidance in this order is, of course, subject to such additional orders and directions as the Chief Justice may prescribe as the administrative head of the unified judicial system under Article V, § 4, of the South Carolina Constitution. As it relates to live hearings or trials, the ability to safely conduct live proceedings will undoubtedly vary significantly over time, and we are confident the Chief Justice will provide the trial courts with additional guidance and instructions as may be necessary to either expand or restrict live proceedings as this pandemic progresses.

the waiting rooms, hallways or other common areas which support the courtroom or hearing room.

**(ii)** Unless the judge authorizes another person to attend, attendance at the trial or hearing shall be limited to the attorneys or parties in the matter, necessary witnesses and necessary court staff. In the event the matter has numerous counsel or parties, the judge may further limit attendance as may be necessary to safely conduct the hearing.

**(iii)** Except as restricted by constitutional or statutory provision, a judge may allow a party to appear or a witness to testify using remote communication technology. As an example, allowing a person who is at a heightened risk from COVID-19 due to age or serious underlying medical condition to appear or testify remotely might be an appropriate accommodation if requested by that person.

**(iv)** Except when necessary for the proceeding (such as handing an exhibit to the judge or opposing counsel, or counsel consulting with their client), all persons in the courtroom or hearing room must maintain at least six feet of distance from other persons in the room. Masks must be worn by all persons as specified by order of the Chief Justice dated July 30, 2020.[4] To ensure social distancing can be maintained, it is recommended the maximum number of persons not exceed one person per 113 square feet of space in the courtroom or hearing room. This area may be reduced if plexiglass shields are being used, but the six foot distancing set forth above should be maintained.

**(v)** Efforts should be made to sanitize the witness stand and/or podium between witnesses and presentation by counsel. Further, before a subsequent trial or hearing is held, the courtroom or hearing room surfaces which may have been

[4] This order is available at https://www.sccourts.org/whatsnew/displaywhatsnew.cfm?indexID=2523.

touched by participants in the prior matter, including door handles, should be sanitized.

**(4) Minimizing Hearings on Motions.** While the practice has been to conduct hearings on virtually all motions, this may not be possible during this emergency. If, upon reviewing a motion, a judge determines that the motion is without merit, the motion may be denied without waiting for any return or other response from the opposing party or parties. In all other situations except those where a motion may be made on an ex parte basis, a ruling shall not be made until the opposing party or parties have had an opportunity to file a return or other response to the motion. A trial judge may elect not to hold a hearing when the judge determines the motion may readily be decided without further input from the lawyers. If a hearing is held, the hearing shall be conducted in the manner specified by (c)(3) above. Consent motions should be decided without a hearing; in the event a party believes that the order issued exceeds the scope of the consent, the party must serve and file a motion raising that issue within ten (10) days of receiving written notice of entry of the order.

**(5) Determination of Probable Cause Following Warrantless Arrest.** When a warrantless arrest has occurred, the arresting officer shall provide the appropriate judge with an affidavit or a written statement with the certification provided by section (c)(16) below setting forth the facts on which the warrantless arrest was made within eight (8) hours of the arrest. The judge shall consider this affidavit or written statement with the certification and, if appropriate, may have the officer or others supplement the affidavit or written statement with the certification with sworn testimony given over the telephone or other remote communication technology. The judge may administer any necessary oath using the telephone or other remote communication technology. If the judge finds a lack of probable cause for the arrest, the defendant shall be released. The goal is to have this determination of probable cause be made within twenty-four (24) hours of the arrest. Only in the most extraordinary and exceptional circumstances should this determination not be made within forty-eight (48) hours of the arrest. If this determination is not made within forty-eight (48) hours after arrest, the judge making the determination shall explain in writing the facts and circumstances giving rise to this delay, and a copy of this explanation shall be provided to the Office of Court Administration.

**(6) Preliminary Hearings in Criminal Cases.** Preliminary hearings may be conducted in-person or by remote communication technology subject to the requirements specified by section (c)(3) above. However, a preliminary hearing conducted by remote communication technology will not be conducted over the objection of the defendant. In the event a defendant objects to a preliminary hearing being conducted using remote communication technology, and the judge determines that an in-person hearing cannot safely be conducted, the preliminary hearing may be continued until such time as the judge determines an in-person hearing can be safely conducted.[5]

**(7) Remote Administration of Oaths.** Where this order authorizes a hearing, trial or other matter to be conducted using remote communication technology, any oath necessary during that hearing, trial or other matter may be administered by the same remote communication technology. While it is preferable that the person administering the oath have both audio and visual communication with the person taking the oath, the oath may be administered if only audio communication is available, provided the person administering the oath can reasonably verify the identity of the person taking the oath. Notaries who are authorized to administer oaths may administer oaths utilizing remote communication technology in the case of depositions. Nothing in this order shall be construed as authorizing remote administration of oaths for any other purpose than those contained in this order.

**(8) Scheduling Orders.**

**(A) Scheduling Orders Issued Prior to April 3, 2020.** Under a prior version of this order, all deadlines under scheduling orders issued prior to April 3, 2020, were stayed, retroactive to March 13, 2020. Forty-five (45) days following the date on which the Governor lifts or rescinds the emergency orders relating to the coronavirus emergency, this stay shall end.

(**B) Scheduling Orders Issued On or After April 3, 2020.** A new or amended scheduling order issued on or after April 3, 2020, will not

[5] If a preliminary hearing is not held before the defendant is indicted by the grand jury, a preliminary hearing will not be held. Rule 2(b), SCRCrimP.

be subject to any stay under this order. Both the decision to issue such an order and the terms of that order must consider the impact the emergency has on the ability of the parties and counsel to proceed. Judges are encouraged to seek input from the parties and counsel before issuing a new or amended scheduling order.

**(9) Extensions of Time and Forgiveness of Procedural Defaults.**

**(A) Extensions of Time.** Due to the increased need for extensions at the start of this emergency, the filing fees for a motion for an extension of time were waived, and the due dates for trial court filings due on or after April 3, 2020 were automatically extended for thirty (30) days. That need has now decreased.[6] Accordingly, the filing fee waiver shall not apply to any motions for extensions filed on or after January 16, 2021. Further, the automatic extension shall not apply to any action or event due on or after January 16, 2021.

**(B) Forgiveness of Procedural Defaults Since March 13, 2020, to April 3, 2020.** In the event a party to a case or other matter pending before a trial court was required to take certain action on or after March 13, 2020, but failed to do so, that procedural default was forgiven, and the required action was required to be taken by May 4, 2020. If a dismissal or other adverse action has been taken, that adverse action was to be rescinded.

**(C) Extensions by Consent.** The provision in Rule 6(b), SCRCP, which permits the granting of only one extension of time by agreement of counsel, is suspended. Counsel may agree to further extensions of time without seeking permission from the court, and parties are strongly encouraged to do so upon request.

**(D) Limitation.** The provisions of (A) thru (C) above shall not

[6] As explained by the order of April 3, 2020, the automatic extension was intended to give "lawyers and self-represented litigants appearing before the trial courts … time to take actions to protect themselves and their families." Since sufficient time has been provided for this to occur, and most lawyers and litigants have been able to adjust to working remotely, this automatic extension is no longer warranted.

extend or otherwise affect the time for taking action under Rules 50(b), 52(b), 59, and 60(b), SCRCP, or Rule 29, SCRCrimP. Further, these provisions do not extend or otherwise affect the time for the serving of a notice of appeal under the South Carolina Appellate Court Rules, or the time to appeal from a lower court to the circuit court.

**(10) Alternatives to Court Reporters and Digital Courtrooms.** A trial or hearing in the court of common pleas (including the master-in-equity court), the court of general sessions or the family court is usually attended by a court reporter (before the master-in-equity this is usually a private court reporter) or is scheduled in one of the digital courtrooms with a court reporter or court monitor. While every effort will be made to continue these practices, this may not be possible as this emergency progresses. In the event such resources are not reasonably available, a trial or hearing authorized under this order may proceed if a recording (preferably both audio and video) is made. The judge shall conduct the proceedings in a manner that will allow a court reporter to create a transcript at a later date. This would include, but is not limited to, making sure the names and spelling of all of the persons speaking or testifying are placed on the record; ensuring exhibits or other documents referred to are clearly identified and properly marked; controlling the proceeding so that multiple persons do not speak at the same time; and noting on the record the start times and the time of any recess or adjournment.

**(11) Courthouses.**

**(A) Filings.** To the extent possible, courthouses should remain open to accept filings and payments, and to report criminal information to the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division and the National Crime Information Center. For the acceptance of documents or payments submitted by delivery to the courthouse, this may be accomplished by providing access to a portion of the courthouse even if the rest of the courthouse is closed to the public; providing an alternate location where the documents or payments may be delivered; or by providing a drop box where filings may be deposited. Adequate signage should be provided at the courthouse to alert persons about how to make filings by delivery, and this information should also be

posted to the court's website, if available.

**(B) Closure.** In the event of the closure of a courthouse, information about the closure shall be provided by signage at the courthouse, and on the court's website if available.

**(C) Quarantine of Incoming Paper Documents.** To protect the safety of the staff of the trial courts, incoming paper documents, whether delivered or mailed to the trial court, may be quarantined for a period of up to forty-eight (48) hours once the documents are physically received by the trial court.[7] Once the quarantine period has ended, these documents will be file stamped with the date on which they were received, and court staff will then process the documents.

(**D) Entrance Screening and Protective Masks.** All persons entering a courthouse shall be screened for fever and shall wear a protective mask while in the courthouse as required by the order of the Chief Justice dated July 30, 2020.[8]

**(12) Statute of Limitations, Repose and Other Similar Statutes.** This Court is aware this emergency has already affected the ability of litigants to commence legal actions and this adverse impact will most likely increase significantly as this pandemic progresses. The Judicial Branch has raised this concern to the leadership of the General Assembly as this issue relates to the statute of limitations, statutes of repose and similar statutes such as S.C. Code Ann. § 15-36-100. While this Court has recognized the existence of judicial authority to toll a statute of limitations in other situations, it would be inappropriate for this Court to consider at this time what relief, if any, may be afforded to a litigant who is unable to file a civil action or take other actions under these statutory provisions due to this emergency.

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[7] One scientific study has reported that the coronavirus can live for up to 24 hours on cardboard. https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.03.09.20033217v1.full.pdf.

[8] This order is available at https://www.sccourts.org/whatsnew/displaywhatsnew.cfm?indexID=2523.

**(13) Service Using AIS Email Address.** A lawyer admitted to practice law in this state may serve a document on another lawyer admitted to practice law in this state using the lawyer's primary email address listed in the Attorney Information System (AIS).[9] For attorneys admitted pro hac vice, service on the associated South Carolina lawyer under this method of service shall be construed as service on the pro hac vice attorney; if appropriate, it is the responsibility of the associated lawyer to provide a copy to the pro hac vice attorney. For documents that are served by email, a copy of the sent email shall be enclosed with the proof of service, affidavit of service, or certificate of service for that document. This method of service may not be used for the service of a summons and complaint, subpoena, or any other pleading or document required to be personally served under Rule 4 of the South Carolina Rules of Civil Procedure, or for any document subject to mandatory e-filing under Section 2 of the South Carolina Electronic Filing Policies and Guidelines. In addition, the following shall apply:

**(A)** Documents served by email must be sent as an attachment in PDF or a similar format unless otherwise agreed by the parties.

**(B)** Service by email is complete upon transmission of the email. If the serving party learns the email did not reach the person to be served, the party shall immediately serve the pleading or paper by another form of service in Rule 5(b)(1), SCRCP, or other similar rule, together with evidence of the prior attempt at service by email.

**(C)** In those actions governed by the South Carolina Rules of Civil Procedure, Rule 6(e), SCRCP, which adds five days to the time a party has the right or is required to do some act or take some proceedings within a prescribed period after the service of a notice or other paper upon him and the notice or paper is served upon him by mail, shall also apply when service is made

[9] The email addresses for lawyers admitted in South Carolina can be accessed utilizing the Attorney Information Search at: https://www.sccourts.org/attorneys/dspSearchAttorneys.cfm.

by email under this provision.

**(D)** Lawyers are reminded of their obligation under Rule 410(g), SCACR, to ensure that their AIS information is current and accurate at all times.

**(14) Signatures of Lawyers on Documents.** A lawyer may sign documents using "s/[typed name of lawyer]," a signature stamp, or a scanned or other electronic version of the lawyer's signature. Regardless of form, the signature shall still act as a certificate under Rule 11, SCRCP, that the lawyer has read the document; that to the best of the lawyer's knowledge, information, and belief there is good ground to support it; and that the document is not interposed for delay.

**(15) Optional Filing Methods.** During this emergency, clerks of the trial courts may, at their option, permit documents to be filed by electronic methods such as fax and email. If the clerk elects to do so, the clerk will post detailed information on the court's website regarding the procedure to be followed, including any appropriate restrictions, such as size limitations, which may apply. Documents filed by one of these optional filing methods shall be treated as being filed when received by the clerk of court and a document received on or before 11:59:59 p.m., Eastern Standard Time, shall be considered filed on that day. These optional filing methods shall not be used for any document that can be e-filed under the South Carolina Electronic Filing Policies and Guidelines. If a trial court does not have a clerk of court, the court shall determine whether to allow the optional filing methods provided by this provision.

**(16) Certification in Lieu of Affidavit.** If a statute, court rule or other provision of law requires an affidavit to be filed in an action, the requirement of an affidavit may be satisfied by a signed certification of the maker stating, "I certify that the foregoing statements made by me are true. I am aware that if any of the foregoing statements made by me are willfully false, I am subject to punishment by contempt."

**(17) Arrest and Search Warrants.** Due to this emergency, it may not be possible for an officer seeking an arrest warrant or a search warrant to appear before the judge to be sworn and sign the warrant. Therefore, a judge may use the procedures provided in section (c)(7) above to remotely

administer the oath to the officer and, if appropriate, the judge may take sworn testimony using remote communication technology to supplement the allegations in the warrant. The judge shall make a notation on the warrant indicating the oath was administered remotely and the officer was not available to sign the warrant in the presence of the judge. If probable cause is found, the judge shall sign the warrant and return the warrant to the officer for execution. While the officer may sign the warrant when it is returned, the failure to do so shall not affect the validity of the warrant. The warrant may be transmitted to the judge and returned to the officer by e-mail, fax or other electronic means. For the purpose of this section, the term "search warrant" shall also include applications under South Carolina Homeland Security Act, S.C. Code Ann. §§ 17-30-10 to -145.

**(18) Discovery.** Depositions and other discovery matters may be conducted using remote communication technology.

**(d) Court of General Sessions.** The following additional guidance is provided regarding the Court of General Sessions:

**(1) Rule 3(c), SCRCrimP.** Based on this emergency, the ninety (90) day period provided by Rule 3(c), SCRCrimP, is hereby increased to one-hundred and twenty (120) days.

**(2) County Grand Juries.** The Solicitor or the Attorney General is hereby authorized to present an indictment to the grand jury using remote communication technology such as video conferencing and teleconferencing, and any necessary oath may be administered using this same remote communication technology pursuant to (c)(7) above. County grand juries may convene in-person so long as the Chief Judge for Administrative Purposes determines grand jurors can be safely distanced and equipped with protective gear, and meeting rooms and courtrooms sanitized. To help ensure appropriate social distancing can be maintained, a minimum of 113 square feet of space per person should be available during any grand jury proceedings, including deliberations.

**(3) Guilty Pleas.** Guilty pleas may be conducted as specified by section (c)(3) above. However, a guilty plea by remote communication technology will not be conducted unless both the defendant and prosecutor consent. If the defendant will participate by remote communication technology, the trial

court must make a determination that the defendant is knowingly and intelligently waiving his right to be physically present for the plea. If the defendant's counsel will participate by remote communication technology, the trial court must determine that the defendant is knowingly and intelligently waiving any right to have counsel physically present, and the court must ensure that the defendant has the ability to consult privately with counsel during the plea proceeding as may be necessary.

**(e) Court of Commons Pleas.** The following additional guidance is provided regarding the Court of Common Pleas, including the Master-in-Equity Courts:

**(1) Isolation and Quarantine Orders.** As this pandemic continues, it is possible the provisions of the South Carolina Emergency Health Powers Act, S.C. Code Ann. §§ 44-4-100 to 44-4-570, may be triggered as it relates to isolation and quarantine orders. Therefore, the Chief Judges for Administrative Purposes for Common Pleas should familiarize themselves with the procedures for judicial review and petitions under that Act, most notably section 44-5-540, and begin to formulate a strategy to meet the timelines specified in that statute for judicial action.

**(2) Procedural Guidance Regarding Filing.** While the trial court case management system does not have a case type and subtype for these matters, the clerks of court should use "Nature of Action Code 699 (Special/Complex Other)" for these matters, and these matters will be exempt from any ADR requirement. Detailed instructions for attorneys to Electronically File in these cases are available at https://www.sccourts.org/efiling/ARGs/ARG-26%20Quarantine%20Petitions.pdf. It is also anticipated that all of these hearings will be conducted using remote communication technology. In coordination with the Pro Bono Program of the South Carolina Bar, a list of lawyers willing to serve as counsel for individuals or groups of individuals who are or are about to be isolated and quarantined under section 44-5-540(F), has been compiled.

**(f) Family Court.** The following additional guidance is provided regarding the Family Court:

**(1) Granting of Uncontested Divorces.** The Family Court may grant an uncontested divorce without holding a hearing where:

**(A)** The parties submit written testimony in the form of affidavits or certifications of the parties and corroborating witnesses that address jurisdiction and venue questions, date of marriage, date of separation, the impossibility of reconciliation and the alleged divorce grounds.

**(B)** The written testimony must include copies of the parties' and witnesses' state-issued photo identifications.

**(C)** Any decree submitted by any attorney shall be accompanied by a statement, as an officer of the court, that all counsel approve the decree and that all waiting periods have been satisfied or waived by the parties.

**(D)** Should either party request a name change in connection with a request for divorce agreement approval, that party shall submit written testimony to the Family Court in the form of an affidavit or certification addressing the appropriate questions for name change and the name which he or she wishes to resume. This relief shall be included in any proposed Order submitted to the Court for approval at the time of the submission of the documents related to the relief requested.

**(2) Approval of Settlement Agreements and Consent Orders without a Hearing.**

**(A) General Orders.** Consent orders resolving all matters, regardless of whether filed or heard prior to or after the declaration of this public health emergency, may be issued without the necessity of holding a hearing. Examples include consent orders resolving motions to compel, discovery disputes, motions to be relieved as counsel, or consent Orders appointing a Guardian ad Litem or addressing Guardian ad Litem fee caps. Any proposed order or agreement must be signed by the parties, counsel for the parties, and the Guardian ad Litem, if one has been appointed.

**(B) Temporary Orders.** Temporary consent orders resolving all matters, regardless of whether filed or heard prior to or after the

declaration of this public health emergency, may be issued without requiring a hearing. Any proposed order or agreement must be signed by the parties, counsel for the parties, and the Guardian ad Litem, if one has been appointed, and may be submitted and issued without the necessity of filing supporting affidavits, financial declarations or written testimony.

**(C) Final Orders.** Final consent orders approving final agreements in all matters, regardless of whether filed or heard prior to or after the declaration of this public health emergency, may be issued without requiring a hearing. These final consent orders include marital settlement agreements, custody and visitation settlement agreements and enforcement agreements. Any proposed order or agreement must be signed by the parties, counsel for the parties, and the Guardian ad Litem, if one has been appointed.

These Consent Orders shall be submitted together with all of the following:

**(i)** The final agreement, such as a marital settlement agreement, signed by the attorneys and the parties.

**(ii)** Updated signed Financial Declarations for each party.

**(iii)** An affidavit or certification from the Guardian ad Litem, if one has been appointed, addressing the best interests of the children.

**(iv)** Written testimony of all parties in the form of affidavit or certification addressing and answering all questions the Family Court would normally ask the parties on the record, including but not limited to affirmations from the parties that:

**a.** The party has entered into the Agreement freely and voluntarily, understands the Agreement, and desires for the Agreement to be approved by the Court, without the necessity of a hearing.

**b.** Setting forth the education level obtained by the party, the employment status of the party and the health of the party.

**c.** There are no additional agreements, and neither party has been promised anything further than that set out in the Agreement.

**d.** The party fully understands the financial situation of each of the parties, the underlying facts, terms and effect of the Agreement.

**e.** The party has given and received full financial disclosure.

**f.** The party has had the benefit of an experienced family law attorney.

**g.** The party has had the opportunity to ask any questions relating to procedures and the effect of the Agreement.

**h.** The party is not acting under coercion or duress, and the party is not under the influence of any alcohol or drug.

**i.** That the Agreement is fair and equitable, it was reached by the parties through arms-length negotiations by competent attorneys and the agreement represents some sacrifices and compromises by each party.

**j.** The Agreement is in the best interests of the children, if there are any.

**k.** That the parties have entered into a marital settlement agreement in full and final settlement of all issues arising from the marriage which have been raised or which could have been raised in the proceeding, other

than issues relating to grounds for divorce.

**l.** The party is aware of the applicable contempt sanctions associated with non-compliance.

**(D) Consent Orders under S.C. Code Ann. § 63-7-1700(D).** Where all the parties consent and the Family Court determines a child may be safely maintained in the home in that the parent has remedied the conditions that caused the removal, and the return of the child to the child's parent would not cause an unreasonable risk of harm to the child's life, physical health, safety, or mental well-being, the Family Court may order the child returned to the child's parent without holding a hearing.

**(3) Hearings Generally.** With respect to all contested hearings in family court, including agency matters and private actions, both temporary and permanent, all hearings should be conducted in accordance with section (c)(3) of this order.

**(4) Execution of Bench Warrants.** While the Chief Justice temporarily suspended the execution of bench warrants for non-payment of child support and alimony,[10] that suspension has expired. Therefore, bench warrants issued by the family court shall be promptly executed by appropriate law enforcement personnel.

**(g) Probate Court.** The following additional guidance is provided:

**Certification in Lieu of Affidavit.** In the probate court, the certificate in section (c)(16) may also be used for a marriage license application under S.C. Code Ann. § 20-1-230, including any application which may be submitted electronically, or for any of the probate court forms available at https://www.sccourts.org/forms/ which are either an affidavit or require an oath or affirmation to be administered.

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[10] See Orders of the Chief Justice dated May 7, 2020 and June 5, 2020 (available at https://www.sccourts.org/whatsnew/displaywhatsnew.cfm?indexID=2510 and https://www.sccourts.org/whatsnew/displaywhatsnew.cfm?indexID=2497).

**(h) Summary Court.** The following additional guidance is provided regarding the Summary Courts:

**(1) Bond Hearings in Criminal Cases.** Bond hearings shall be conducted in the manner specified by section (c)(3) above. The frequency of these bond hearings shall be specified by the Chief Justice.[11] In addition to the normal factors for determining whether the defendant will be required to post a bond or will be released on a personal recognizance, the judge should consider the need to minimize the detention center population during this emergency. Further, judges should consider home detention or other options to help reduce detention center population. The summary court shall uphold victims' rights in accordance with the South Carolina Constitution, including seeking to ensure that a victim advocate/notifier is available for all bond hearings, subject to the rights of the defendant under the United States Constitution and the South Carolina Constitution.

**(2) Transmission of Warrants for General Sessions Offenses.** Warrants for general sessions offenses shall continue to be forwarded to the clerk of the court of general sessions as provided for Rule 3, SCRCrimP. As to an arrest warrant for a defendant who is already in the custody of the South Carolina Department of Corrections, or a detention center or jail in South Carolina, this Court hereby authorizes these defendants to be served with the warrant by mail. Therefore, if it is determined that the defendant is already in custody, the judge shall annotate the warrant to reflect that a copy has been mailed to the defendant, mail a copy of the annotated warrant to the defendant, and immediately forward the annotated warrant and any allied documents to the clerk of the court of general sessions for processing under Rule 3, SCRCrimP. If the defendant is incarcerated at the South Carolina Department of Corrections, the judge shall also transmit a copy of the annotated warrant to the Office of General Counsel at the South Carolina Department of Corrections.

**(3) Guilty Pleas.** For offenses within the jurisdiction of the summary

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[11] Currently, the Chief Justice has directed bond hearings be held twice a day. See Memorandum of the Chief Justice dated September 25, 2020 (available at https://www.sccourts.org/whatsnew/displaywhatsnew.cfm?indexID=2530).

court (including those cases transferred to the summary court pursuant to S.C. Code Ann. § 22-3-545), guilty pleas may be conducted as specified by section (c)(3) above. However, a guilty plea by remote communication technology will not be conducted unless both the defendant and prosecutor consent. If the defendant will participate by remote communication technology, the trial court must make a determination that the defendant is knowingly and intelligently waiving his right to be physically present for the plea. If the defendant's counsel will participate by remote communication technology, the trial court must determine that the defendant is knowingly and intelligently waiving any right to have counsel physically present, and the court must ensure that the defendant has the ability to consult privately with counsel during the plea proceeding as may be necessary. A defendant charged with criminal offenses, traffic violations, ordinance violations, and administrative violations within the jurisdiction of the summary courts may plead guilty by affidavit or certification. This procedure may only be utilized by persons represented by an attorney and desiring to plead guilty where the charge does not carry imprisonment as a possible punishment or where the prosecutor or prosecuting law enforcement officer and defense attorney have agreed that the recommended sentence will not result in jail time. If applicable, the prosecutor or prosecuting law enforcement officer must comply with the Victims' Bill of Rights under Article I, § 24 of the South Carolina Constitution.[12]

**(i) Effective Date and Revocation of Prior Orders and Memoranda.** This order is effective immediately. Unless extended, this order shall be rescinded in ninety (90) days. This order replaces the following orders and memoranda previously issued.

**(1)** Memoranda of the Chief Justice dated March 16, 2020, which are labeled as "Trial Courts Coronavirus Memo," and "Summary Courts Coronavirus Memo."

**(2)** Order dated March 18, 2020, and labeled "Statewide Family Court Order."

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[12] This language regarding pleas by affidavit or certification incorporates language from a May 7, 2020, order of the Chief Justice (available at https://www.sccourts.org/courtOrders/displayOrder.cfm?orderNo=2020-05-07-01).

**(3)** Order dated May 29, 2020, entitled "County Grand Juries."

s/ Donald W. Beatty C.J.

s/ John W. Kittredge J.

s/ Kaye G. Hearn J.

s/ John Cannon Few J.

s/ George C. James, Jr. J.

Columbia, South Carolina
April 3, 2020
As Amended December 16, 2020

# The Supreme Court of South Carolina

In the Matter of Duy Duc Nguyen, Petitioner.

Appellate Case No. 2020-001620

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ORDER

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The records in the office of the Clerk of the Supreme Court show that on November 14, 2011, Petitioner was admitted and enrolled as a member of the Bar of this State. Currently, Petitioner is a regular member of the Bar in good standing.

Petitioner has now submitted a resignation from the South Carolina Bar pursuant to Rule 409 of the South Carolina Appellate Court Rules. The resignation is accepted.

Within twenty (20) days of the date of this order, Petitioner shall surrender the certificate of admission to the Clerk of this Court. If Petitioner cannot locate this certificate, Petitioner shall provide the Clerk with an affidavit indicating this fact and indicating that the certificate will be immediately surrendered if it is subsequently located.

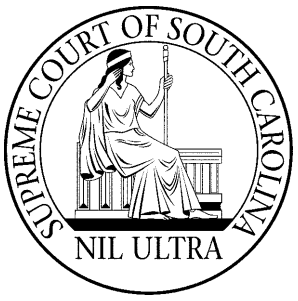
FOR THE COURT

BY s/Jason Bobertz
DEPUTY CLERK

Columbia, South Carolina
December 17, 2020

cc:
Duy Duc Nguyen, Esquire
Deborah Stroud McKeown, Esquire

South Carolina Bar
United States District Court
Commission on Continuing Legal Education




# OPINIONS

## OF

# THE SUPREME COURT

## AND

# COURT OF APPEALS

## OF

# SOUTH CAROLINA

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**ADVANCE SHEET NO. 50**
**December 23, 2020**
**Daniel E. Shearouse, Clerk**
**Columbia, South Carolina**
**www.sccourts.org**

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**THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA**
**In The Court of Appeals**

Fairfield Waverly, LLC, Respondent,

v.

Dorchester County Assessor, Appellant.

GS Windsor Club, LLC, Respondent,

v.

Dorchester County Assessor, Appellant.

Appellate Case No. 2017-000569

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Appeal From The Administrative Law Court
S. Phillip Lenski, Administrative Law Judge

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Opinion No. 5769
Heard February 11, 2020 – Filed August 26, 2020
Withdrawn, Substituted, and Refiled December 23, 2020

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**AFFIRMED**

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Andrew T. Shepherd, of Hart Hyland Shepherd, LLC, of Summerville, and John G. Frampton, of St. George, both for Appellant.

Burnet Rhett Maybank, III, and James Peter Rourke, both of Nexsen Pruet, LLC, of Columbia, for Respondents.

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**HEWITT, J.:** This case concerns section 12-37-3135 of the South Carolina Code (2014). That statute allows a twenty-five percent property tax exemption when there is an "Assessable Transfer of Interest" of certain types of real property.

The issue in this case is one of timing. In simple terms, the question presented is whether a property owner must claim this exemption during the first year of eligibility or whether there is a longer period.

The Administrative Law Court (ALC) took the latter view and found these taxpayers properly claimed the exemption. This result follows the best reading of the statute's language, particularly when the statute is read with an eye on what actually happens when an assessable transfer of interest occurs. We affirm.

## BACKGROUND

This appeal includes two cases that were consolidated at the ALC. The parties stipulated the facts of both cases. Fairfield Waverly, LLC, and GS Windsor Club, LLC, (collectively, "Taxpayers") purchased property in Dorchester County during the closing months of 2012.

Neither taxpayer claimed the ATI Exemption in 2013. When Taxpayers did claim the exemption in January of 2014, the Dorchester County Assessor ("the Assessor") denied the requests. Taxpayers appealed to the ALC, and the ALC ruled in their favor. The Assessor appealed the ALC's decision to this court.

## ISSUE ON APPEAL

Did the ALC err in finding the Taxpayers were eligible to claim the ATI Exemption?

## STANDARD OF REVIEW

The applicable standard of review comes from the Administrative Procedures Act. *See* S.C. Code Ann. § 1-23-610 (Supp. 2019). Our review is confined to the record, and we may affirm, reverse, or remand if the ALC's decision is defective in any of certain particulars. *See* § 1-23-610(B). We need not list those particulars

here because this case turns on an examination of statutory language. We review that issue de novo. *Town of Summerville v. City of N. Charleston*, 378 S.C. 107, 110, 662 S.E.2d 40, 41 (2008).

**ANALYSIS**

Section 12-37-3135 creates the ATI Exemption. Subsection (A) defines five terms of art:

> (1) "ATI fair market value" means the fair market value of a parcel of real property and any improvements thereon as determined by appraisal at the time the parcel last underwent an assessable transfer of interest.
>
> (2) "Current fair market value" means the fair market value of a parcel of real property as reflected on the books of the property tax assessor for the current property tax year.
>
> (3) "Exemption value" means the ATI fair market value when reduced by the exemption allowed by this section.
>
> (4) "Fair market value" means the fair market value of a parcel of real property and any improvements thereon as determined by the property tax assessor by an initial appraisal, by an appraisal at the time the parcel undergoes an assessable transfer of interest, and as periodically reappraised pursuant to Section 12-43-217.
>
> (5) "Property tax value" means fair market value as it may be adjusted downward to reflect the limit imposed pursuant to Section 12-37-3140(B).

§ 12-37-3135(A). Subsection (B)(1) establishes the exemption itself:

> When a parcel of real property and any improvements thereon subject to the six percent assessment ratio provided pursuant to Section 12-43-220(e) and which is

> currently subject to property tax undergoes an assessable transfer of interest after 2010, there is allowed an exemption from property tax of an amount of the ATI fair market value of the parcel as determined in the manner provided in item (2) of this subsection. Calculation of property tax value for such parcels is based on exemption value. The exemption allowed by this section applies at the time the ATI fair market value first applies.

§ 12-37-3135(B)(1). Subsection (B)(2) sets the exemption's amount and gives two limitations:

> (a) The exemption allowed by this section is an amount equal to twenty-five percent of ATI fair market value of the parcel. However, no exemption value calculated pursuant to this section may be less than current fair market value of the parcel.
>
> (b) If the ATI fair market value of the parcel is less than the current fair market value, the exemption otherwise allowed pursuant to this section does not apply and the ATI fair market value applies as provided pursuant to Section 12-37-3140(A)(1)(b).

§ 12-37-3135(B)(2). These limitations operate to establish the "current fair market value"—in laymen's terms, the pre-sale fair market value—as the "floor" for property tax purposes.

Subsection (C) requires a notification procedure for the exemption:

> The exemption allowed in this section does not apply unless the owner of the property, or the owner's agent, notifies the county assessor that the property will be subject to the six percent assessment ratio provided pursuant to Section 12-43-220(e) before January thirty-first for the tax year for which the owner first claims eligibility for the exemption. No further

> notifications are necessary from the current owner while the property remains subject to the six percent assessment ratio.

§ 12-37-3135(C).

A different statute provides that "once every fifth year each county or the State shall appraise and equalize those properties under its jurisdiction." S.C. Code Ann. § 12-43-217(A) (2014). "[T]he county or State shall implement the program and assess all property on the newly appraised values." *Id.*

Here, and below, the parties' arguments center on section 12-37-3135's language. Though we look at the whole statute when considering how it operates, the parts directly at issue in this case are the definitions in subsection (A) of "ATI fair market value" and "current fair market value," as well as subsection (C) which says the exemption does not apply unless the county is given notice "before January thirty-first for the tax year for which the owner first claims eligibility for the exemption." § 12-37-3135(C).

Taxpayers claim section 12-37-3135's plain meaning allows them to choose when to claim the ATI Exemption. They argue the words "first claims" in subsection (C) shows the legislature contemplated some property owners might not claim the ATI Exemption immediately. To the same end, Taxpayers point out that the statute does not affirmatively direct or require property owners to claim the ATI Exemption the first year they are eligible to do so.

The Assessor contends any delay in claiming the exemption causes problems with the statutory definitions. The Assessor's basic argument relies on the fact that a property's "current" fair market value changes over time. Specifically, the Assessor argues that when a taxpayer delays in claiming the ATI Exemption, the delay causes the "ATI fair market value"—the appraised price after the property changed hands—to often become the same (or nearly the same) as the property's "Current fair market value." This happens because property is reappraised when an assessable transfer of interest occurs. In the Assessor's view, this necessarily triggers subsection (B)(2)'s statutory "floor" that the property's exemption value may not be less than its "current fair market value."

In other words, the Assessor argues a delay in claiming the exemption is not necessarily forbidden. A delay simply means the exemption will have no practical benefit because two of the statute's key terms—"ATI fair market value" and "current fair market value"—end up being the same number and because that number is the floor below which the exemption may not go.

There are two reasons we find the Taxpayers properly claimed the ATI Exemption. First, we find section 12-37-3135's language envisions a taxpayer might not claim the ATI Exemption immediately. As noted above, subsection (C) explains that the ATI Exemption does not apply unless the county has notice "before January thirty-first for the tax year for which the owner first claims eligibility for the exemption." § 12-37-3135(C). That language implicitly, if not directly, acknowledges an owner might not claim the exemption immediately. It plainly is not an affirmative requirement that a property owner claim the ATI Exemption during the first year of eligibility.

Section 12-37-3135(B)(1) supports this reading as well. That subsection explains the ATI Exemption "applies at the time the ATI fair market value first applies." This suggests the legislature intended the ATI Exemption's value to be set and established at the time the assessable transfer of interest occurs. *See Beaufort Cty. v. S.C. State Election Comm'n*, 395 S.C. 366, 371, 718 S.E.2d 432, 435 (2011) ("The primary rule of statutory construction is to ascertain and give effect to the intent of the General Assembly.").

Second, we note that this statute is one of several property tax statutes. We do not look at statutes in isolation. Instead, we consider how the statutes operate with each other when striving to arrive at any one statute's proper meaning. *See S.C. State Ports Auth. v. Jasper Cty.*, 368 S.C. 388, 398, 629 S.E.2d 624, 629 (2006) ("In construing statutory language, the statute must be read as a whole and sections which are a part of the same general statutory law must be construed together and each one given effect."); *Duke Energy Corp. v. S.C. Dep't of Revenue*, 415 S.C. 351, 355, 782 S.E.2d 590, 592 (2016) ("[T]he [c]ourt should not concentrate on isolated phrases within the statute, but rather, read the statute as a whole and in a manner consonant and in harmony with its purpose.").

All taxpayers are liable for property taxes based on the property they own as of December 31 of the preceding year. *See* S.C. Code Ann. § 12-37-610 (2014). The tax bills for a given year do not go out until September of that year. *See* S.C. Code

Ann. § 12-45-70(A) (2014). The bills for the "current" tax year are not due until the following January. *Id.*

There is also a statutory requirement that property be reappraised when it is sold. The legislature enacted that statute, often referred to in common parlance as "point of sale," in 2006. *See* S.C. Code Ann. § 12-37-3150 (2014). The county has to give the new property owner notice of a reappraisal by July 1 or as soon thereafter as practical. *See* S.C. Code Ann. § 12-60-2510 (2014). Related statutes explain the procedures for a property owner to contest the reappraised value. *See, e.g.,* S.C. Code Ann. § 12-60-2520 to -2540 (2014).

These features of the law—that tax liability for the current year looks backwards, that taxes are not billed until late in the "current" year or due until the next year, and that the reappraisal process following an assessable transfer of interest does not happen instantaneously—cannot help but inform our analysis on the ATI Exemption. To illustrate this, consider the position of someone who buys property after the month of January in a given year. We use January because January 31 is the key date for claiming the ATI Exemption in section 12-37-3135(C).

The person who buys property after January must have until January 31 of the following year to claim the ATI Exemption. To conclude otherwise would make the statute meaningless. By that time, however, the law envisions the property will have been reappraised.

This matters because it shows that even by the first January following the sale, the property's "current" fair market value will actually be the property's new and reappraised value. This illustrates the definitional parts of the ATI Exemption cannot change over time as the Assessor argues. Doing so would cause the ATI Exemption to "collapse" on itself the same way the Assessor argues it "collapses" for Taxpayers here.

Now consider the situation when, as here, an assessable transfer occurs later in the year. GS Windsor Club bought its property in November of 2012. Fairfield Waverly bought its property that December. Both taxpayers were going to be statutorily liable for the 2013 property taxes because they owned the property as of December 31, 2012. We do not know whether the reappraisal process would occur by the end of 2012, but we doubt it. Neither taxpayer would receive their first tax bill until September of 2013. That bill would be due in January of 2014.

The Assessor contends that even by the receipt of the first tax bill in September of 2013, Taxpayers already lost the ability to claim the ATI Exemption because they did not do so by the previous January, almost immediately after both sales occurred. We believe a construction that bars Taxpayers in this situation from claiming the exemption would create a disorderly process rather than an orderly one. We cannot conceive of a reason why one set of purchasers—those who purchase property early in the year—would be afforded two tax years to claim the ATI Exemption and a flexible reading of the word "current" while a second group—those who purchase later in the year—would have not even a year (here, less than two months) to make the same election and would have a literal reading of the word "current" pressed upon them.

Precedent explains the ultimate goal in statutory interpretation is to give effect to the statute's intent. *See Denman v. City of Columbia*, 387 S.C. 131, 138, 691 S.E.2d 465, 468 (2010). Section 12-37-3135's basic purpose is to provide property owners relief from the potentially burdensome increase in tax liability caused by an assessable transfer of interest and the subsequent reappraisal. We believe the legislature intended all purchasers would have a meaningful opportunity to claim the ATI Exemption. Accordingly, we find the legislature articulated that intent in tying the exemption's application to notice by January 31 of "the tax year for which the owner first claims eligibility." § 12-37-3135(C).

In their brief and at oral argument, the Taxpayers contended this interpretation of the statute would allow property owners to claim the ATI Exemption several years, or even decades, after the assessable transfer of interest occurs. We disagree.

Allowing property owners to claim the ATI Exemption for decades would defeat the legislature's intent of providing counties with a uniform mechanism of reappraising properties to determine their fair market values and assessing taxes accordingly. *See S.C. State Ports Auth.*, 368 S.C. at 398, 629 S.E.2d at 629 ("In construing statutory language, the statute must be read as a whole and sections which are a part of the same general statutory law must be construed together and each one given effect."); *Duke Energy Corp.*, 415 S.C. at 355, 782 S.E.2d at 592 ("[T]he [c]ourt should not concentrate on isolated phrases within the statute, but rather, read the statute as a whole and in a manner consonant and in harmony with its purpose.").

This result follows from two principles. First, the legislature intended all purchasers would have a meaningful opportunity to claim the ATI Exemption. As we have explained, the statute's text and evident purpose support this.

Second, we must read multiple statutes dealing with the same subject matter so that they work together as long as it is possible to do so. This is true generally, and the South Carolina Real Property Valuation Reform Act explicitly tells us that its provisions are meant to complement other valuation statutes and that the Reform Act gets priority if a conflict exists. S.C. Code Ann. § 12-37-3120 (2014); *see also Charleston County Assessor v. University Ventures*, 427 S.C. 273, 290–91, 831 S.E.2d 412, 421 (2019). The ATI Exemption is a part of that act.

We are convinced there is no conflict between the ATI Exemption, the five-year reassessment statute, and other statutes in this area. Section 12-60-2510(A)(1) mandates that written notice of a five-year reassessment be sent to taxpayers by October 1 of the year the reassessment is being implemented. Receiving the five-year reassessment notice triggers the South Carolina Revenue Procedures Act. *See* S.C. Code Ann. §§ 12-60-10 to -3390 (2014 and Supp. 2019). That act explains a taxpayer wishing to lodge an objection to the reassessment must do so within ninety days. *See* § 12-60-2510(A)(3). The ATI Exemption requires a taxpayer to claim the exemption by providing notice before January 31. *See* § 12-37-3135(C) (2014).

The natural result of reading these statutes together is that a taxpayer who purchases qualifying property before an implementation year may claim the ATI Exemption by January 31 of the implementation year or may also use the appeal procedure in the Revenue Procedures Act. This ensures such a taxpayer will have a meaningful opportunity to claim the ATI Exemption and honors the legislature's intent that there be a uniform procedure for reassessing property.

The reassessment process has no effect on a taxpayer purchasing property during an implementation year. As already noted, property tax liability looks backwards to December 31 of the previous year. Someone purchasing property during an implementation year would not receive the first property tax bill until the following year. That taxpayer is entitled to claim the ATI Exemption, but may not wait until after the next five-year reassessment.

**CONCLUSION**

For the foregoing reasons, the ALC's judgment in Taxpayers' favor is

**AFFIRMED.**

**LOCKEMY, C.J., and GEATHERS, J., concur.**

**THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA**
**In The Court of Appeals**

Bryan Okeith Seabrook, Appellant,

v.

Town of Mount Pleasant and Rae Wooten, in her Official Capacity as Coroner of Charleston County, Defendants,

Of which Town of Mount Pleasant is the Respondent.

Appellate Case No. 2017-002532

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Appeal From Charleston County
J. C. Nicholson, Jr., Circuit Court Judge

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Opinion No. 5786
Heard September 9, 2020 – Filed December 23, 2020

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**AFFIRMED**

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Mark Andrew Peper, Sr., of The Peper Law Firm, P.A., of Charleston, for Appellant.

Timothy Alan Domin and Daniel Paul Ranaldo, both of Clawson & Staubes, LLC, of Charleston, for Respondent.

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**HEWITT, J.:** Bryan Seabrook brought this suit claiming the warrant for his arrest was based on a false and misleading affidavit and the Town of Mount Pleasant was liable for arresting and prosecuting him without probable cause. The circuit court

granted the Town a summary judgment. We affirm because the affidavit supports probable cause even when its contents are changed as Seabrook proposes.

## BACKGROUND

Seabrook was arrested in 2013 roughly two months after he arrived at the hospital with his girlfriend's two-year-old grandson. The child was unconscious and died a short time later.

It quickly became evident that the child had been in the custody of only three adults that day: the child's mother, his grandmother, and Seabrook. Authorities also learned that the child had old bruises as well as fresh bruises and that the child's fatal injuries were likely not caused by a minor accident.

As time went on, suspicion increasingly pointed to Seabrook. The medical examiner reportedly told police that although the child had new and old injuries, the fatal injury likely occurred within the last twenty-four hours, would have been extremely painful, and the child would not have acted normally afterwards. This implicated Seabrook because nobody contested the child was happy and eating when the child was left in Seabrook's exclusive care starting around 4:30 in the afternoon. Also, the child's three and four-year-old sisters said that they saw Seabrook strike their brother, that Seabrook instructed them to keep this a secret, and that Seabrook told them their brother had gone to heaven.

Police coordinated with the solicitor's office and secured a warrant for Seabrook's arrest shortly after their conversation with the medical examiner. Seabrook was arrested in May 2013 and later indicted for homicide by child abuse.

Seabrook did not post bond for about a year and a half. About a year after he did post bond, the solicitor's office dropped the charges. Among other things, the solicitor noted the medical examiner's revised opinion that stated the fatal injury could have resulted from a minor blow that aggravated the child's previous injuries. Seabrook filed this suit not long after his criminal charge was dropped.

Seabrook's complaint contained three causes of action—false arrest, gross negligence, and malicious prosecution—but his overarching argument was that the arrest warrant relied on an affidavit containing false and misleading statements.

The circuit court granted the Town's motion for summary judgment for a number of reasons. Included among them was that probable cause to arrest Seabrook existed

as a matter of law, even taking into consideration the alleged omissions and mistakes during the warrant process.

## ANALYSIS

We begin by specifying the appropriate claim for this sort of circumstance. There is no viable claim in this case for false arrest. Seabrook's able counsel candidly conceded the arrest warrant was valid on its face. Precedent explains "one arrested pursuant to a facially valid warrant has no cause of action for false arrest." *Carter v. Bryant*, 429 S.C. 298, 306, 838 S.E.2d 523, 528 (Ct. App. 2020). If the arrest nevertheless lacked probable cause, the appropriate claim is for malicious prosecution. *Id.*

There is also no viable claim for negligence or gross negligence. Seabrook contends the officers negligently arrested him without probable cause. This is indistinguishable from his malicious prosecution claim.

The parties concede the Town would be liable if officers misstated or omitted material facts during the warrant process and did so intentionally or recklessly. It is a well-settled feature of criminal law that someone arrested pursuant to a facially valid warrant may bring a post-arrest challenge to probable cause if evidence shows the police misled the magistrate either recklessly or on purpose. *See Franks v. Delaware*, 438 U.S. 154 (1978). We mentioned in *Carter* that although some other courts have held it is logical to extend this feature of criminal law to civil tort claims, we were not aware of a South Carolina decision that did so. 429 S.C. at 311–12, 838 S.E.2d at 530–31. We apply this framework here because the parties have accepted it.

The warrant in this case was based on a police officer's affidavit. Seabrook contends three sentences in the affidavit contain false and misleading information.

First, Seabrook claims the police misrepresented who was supervising the child before the child died. The officer wrote in the affidavit that Seabrook had custody of the child on the day of the child's death and "sole custody" after 4 o'clock. Seabrook says three adults supervised the child on the day in question and the child was not in Seabrook's sole custody until 4:30.

Second, Seabrook disputes the description of the child's injuries. The affidavit explained the child suffered "fatal acute abdominal injuries, resulting from blunt force trauma." Seabrook believes this implies the fatal blow was inflicted shortly before the child died and is not faithful to the medical examiner's explanation that an "acute" injury is an injury occurring in the last twenty-four hours.

Third and finally, Seabrook believes the affidavit wrongly suggested there were onlookers who could definitively say Seabrook inflicted the fatal blow. The affidavit stated "eyewitnesses" reported seeing Seabrook strike the child shortly before the child became unresponsive. Seabrook claims the affidavit should have mentioned that the witnesses were the child's three and four-year-old sisters and that there was some question about what the children could reliably say, given their ages.

We agree with the circuit court that the affidavit would support probable cause even if it was revised as Seabrook proposes. There is no *Franks* violation if the "corrected" affidavit establishes probable cause. *See State v. Missouri*, 337 S.C. 548, 554, 524 S.E.2d 394, 397 (1999). Probable cause is not an exacting standard. It only requires evidence that would cause "an ordinarily prudent and cautious person" to have a good faith belief that the arrestee is guilty of a crime. *Wortman v. Spartanburg*, 310 S.C. 1, 4, 425 S.E.2d 18, 20 (1992).

We understand Seabrook's desire that the affidavit specify precisely when he assumed sole custody of the child, explain that the fatal injury could have occurred up to twenty-four hours before the child's death, and disclose that the witnesses who reported seeing Seabrook strike the child were young children. Still, these revisions do not change the affidavit's core facts. Hospital staff deemed the child's death to be suspicious. A medical investigator opined the fatal injury was likely inflicted within twenty-four hours of the child's death. Seabrook brought the child to the hospital after the child had been in Seabrook's exclusive custody for over an hour. The child's young siblings told authorities they witnessed Seabrook strike the child.

It is worth mentioning that many police officers are not lawyers and that affidavits are often written "in the midst and haste of a criminal investigation." *United States v. Ventresca*, 380 U.S. 102, 108 (1965). Officers "cannot be expected to include in an affidavit every piece of information gathered in the course of an investigation." *United States v. Colkley*, 899 F.2d 297, 300 (4th Cir. 1990). Like the circuit court, we are convinced the core facts noted above would lead someone of ordinary prudence to form a good faith belief Seabrook was guilty of a crime.

Finally, we respectfully disagree with Seabrook's argument that this case is controlled by precedent explaining South Carolina treats probable cause as a question of fact that must ordinarily go to the jury. *See, e.g., Jones v. City of Columbia*, 301 S.C. 62, 65, 389 S.E.2d 662, 663 (1990). Probable cause can "be decided as a matter of law when the evidence yields but one conclusion." *Law v. S.C. Dep't of Corr.*, 368 S.C. 424, 436, 629 S.E.2d 642, 649 (2006). This is not a situation like *Jones*, in which probable cause turns on a conflict in witness testimony.

Because this issue is dispositive, we decline to address Seabrook's remaining issues. *See Futch v. McAllister Towing of Georgetown, Inc.*, 335 S.C. 598, 613, 518 S.E.2d 591, 598 (1999) (stating an appellate court need not address remaining issues when a prior issue is dispositive).

**CONCLUSION**

Based on the foregoing, the grant of summary judgment is

**AFFIRMED.**

**THOMAS and HILL, JJ., concur.**