

SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT OF MAINE

Town of Eddington v. University of Maine Foundation

2007 ME 74, 926 A.2d 183 · Decided June 21, 2007

SUMMARY

The Maine Supreme Judicial Court considered whether the Town of Eddington's enforcement action against the University of Maine Foundation for violating subdivision approval conditions was barred by Maine's six-year general statute of limitations. The court held that the twenty-year limitations provision in the subdivision statute, 30-A M.R.S. § 4402(5), governed the action, vacated the dismissal, and remanded for further proceedings.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Judicial Court of Maine
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Alexander, J.; Alexander; Clifford; Levy; Saufley
JURISDICTION	Maine
DECIDED	June 21, 2007
DISPOSITION	vacated
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	The Town of Eddington appealed from a Superior Court judgment granting the University of Maine Foundation's motion for judgment on the pleadings and dismissing the Town's complaint with prejudice on statute-of-limitations grounds.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	On appeal from a judgment on the pleadings for the defendant, the court accepts properly pleaded facts as true and construes reasonable inferences in favor of the plaintiff.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published precedential opinion of the Supreme Judicial Court of Maine.
PARTIES	Town of Eddington v. University of Maine Foundation

TOPICS

municipal law statutory interpretation ordinances appellate procedure real estate

PRACTICE AREAS

Municipal law Real estate law Land-use regulation Appellate procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether 14 M.R.S. § 752, the general six-year statute of limitations for civil actions, barred the Town's enforcement action against an allegedly noncompliant subdivision.
2. Whether 30-A M.R.S. § 4402(5), as part of the integrated state subdivision law, established a twenty-year limitations period applicable to enforcement actions involving violations of subdivision approvals and municipal subdivision ordinances.

HOLDINGS

1. The twenty-year limitations provision in 30-A M.R.S. § 4402(5) governs the Town's action to enforce alleged violations of the state subdivision law, subdivision approval conditions, and municipal subdivision ordinances; the general six-year limitations period in 14 M.R.S. § 752 does not limit the action.
2. The Superior Court erred in dismissing the Town's complaint on the ground that the action was barred by the six-year statute of limitations.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Section 4402(5), within the subdivision statute, establishes the time parameters for bringing enforcement actions to address violations of subdivision ordinances.” (926 A.2d at 185)

“If, as UMF argues, a subdivision in violation of the subdivision statute was exempt from an enforcement action after six years pursuant to 14 M.R.S. § 752, it would be meaningless to say that a subdivision in violation of that statute that has been in existence for twenty years is also exempted.” (926 A.2d at 185-86)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

In January 1998, Eddington approved a subdivision plan submitted by the University of Maine Foundation, conditioned on construction of a sixty-foot-wide road within two years and in accordance with the Town's subdivision ordinance. The road requirement could be waived upon a showing of extraordinary hardship or other special circumstances. The Town alleged that UMF failed to construct the road as required and sued in March 2006 for violations of municipal ordinances and state subdivision law, seeking declaratory and injunctive relief and monetary fines.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The Town approved UMF's subdivision plan in 1998, subject to construction of a sixty-foot-wide road. In March 2006, the Town sued UMF for alleged violations of municipal subdivision ordinances and state subdivision law, seeking declaratory and injunctive relief and fines. The Superior Court granted UMF's motion for judgment on the pleadings, concluding that the six-year limitations period in 14 M.R.S. § 752 barred the action. The Supreme Judicial Court vacated and remanded.

DISPOSITION

vacated

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

Remanded for further proceedings consistent with the opinion.

CASES CITED

- Heber v. Lucerne-in-Me. Vill. Corp., 2000 ME 137, ¶ 7, 755 A.2d 1064, 1066
- Gorham Sav. Bank v. Balzley, 1998 ME 9, ¶ 7, 704 A.2d 398, 401

OPINION

ALEXANDER, J.

ALEXANDER, J. [¶ 1] The Town of Eddington appeals from a judgment of the Superior Court (Penobscot County, Mead, J.) granting the University of Maine Foundation’s (UMF) motion for a judgment on the pleadings and dismissing with prejudice the Town’s complaint.

In support of its motion, UMF argued that the Town’s complaint was filed beyond the six-year statute of limitations of 14 M.R.S. § 752 (2006). The Town asserts that because the applicable statute of limitations is twenty years, 30-A M.R.S. § 4402(5) (2006), its claims are not time-barred.

Because we conclude that 14 M.R.S. § 752 does not limit the time for bringing this action, we vacate the judgment. *184I. CASE HISTORY [¶ 2] In January 1998, the Town approved a plan, submitted by UMF, for the construction of a subdivision.

The subdivision’s approval was subject to several conditions, including a requirement that UMF construct a “sixty-foot wide road” within two years of the approval, and in accordance with the Town’s subdivision ordinance.¹ The road construction requirement could be waived upon a showing of extraordinary hardship or other special circumstances. [¶ 3] In March 2006, the Town filed a complaint against UMF asserting violations of its subdivision ordinances and the State subdivision law because of UMF’s failure to construct the road as required.

The Town’s complaint sought a declaratory judgment, injunctive relief, and imposition of fines of up to \$1000 for each violation. Among the authorities to support the action, the complaint cited 30-A M.R.S. § 4406 (2006). [¶ 4] UMF answered the complaint, denying the essential allegations and asserting affirmative defenses, including statute of limitations, waiver, and estoppel.

Subsequently, UMF filed a motion for judgment on the pleadings. In the motion, UMF asserted that it was accepting the facts as pleaded in the complaint. It argued that those facts demonstrated that the complaint was barred by the six-year statute of limitations found in 14 M.R.S. § 752 because the cause of action accrued no later than January 2000, and the complaint was filed in March 2006.² The trial court granted UMF’s motion and dismissed the complaint.

The Town appealed. II. LEGAL ANALYSIS [¶ 5] When reviewing on appeal a judgment on the pleadings in favor of the defendant, we accept as true the properly pleaded facts alleged in the complaint, and we construe all reasonable inferences that can be drawn from those facts most favorably to the plaintiff. See *Heber v. Lucerne-in-Me. Vill. Corp.*, 2000 ME 137, ¶ 7, 755 A.2d 1064, 1066. [¶ 6] The Town's complaint asserts violations of its ordinance and State subdivision laws by UMF's failure to construct the sixty-foot road as required in the subdivision approval.

In addition to seeking a declaratory judgment that the subdivision is operating in violation of law, the complaint requested an injunction against the continuing violations of the ordinance and *185punishment of the violations with consecutive fines of up to \$1000 each. [¶ 7] Resolving whether the Town's claims against UMF are time-barred requires determining which statute of limitations applies.

The Town argues that a twenty-year statute of limitations applies for complaints seeking to enforce the Town's subdivision ordinance and the State subdivision statute, 30-A M.R.S. §§ 4401-4407 (2006). [¶ 8] The Town's authority to bring a direct enforcement action is established by 30-A M.R.S. § 4406 of the State subdivision statute, which reads, in part: § 4406.

Enforcement; prohibited activities The Attorney General, the municipality or the planning board of any municipality may institute proceedings to enjoin a violation of this subchapter. 1. Sales or other conveyances. No person may sell, lease, develop, build upon or convey for consideration, or offer or agree to sell, lease, develop, build upon or convey for consideration any land or dwelling unit in a subdivision that has not been approved by the municipal reviewing authority of the municipality where the subdivision is located E. Any person who, after receiving approval from the municipal reviewing authority... constructs or develops the subdivision or transfers any lot in a manner other than depicted on the approved plans or amendments or in violation of any condition imposed by the municipal reviewing authority... must be penalized in accordance with section 4452. [¶ 9] The Town asserts that 30-A M.R.S. § 4402(5) is the statute of limitations that governs this action.

Section 4402(5) states, in pertinent part: § 4402. Exceptions This subchapter [on subdivisions] does not apply to: 1. Previously approved subdivisions.... 5. Subdivisions in existence for at least 20 years. A subdivision in violation of this subchapter that has been in existence for 20 years or more.... [¶ 10] Section 4402(5), within the subdivision statute, establishes the time parameters for bringing enforcement actions to address violations of subdivision ordinances.

It is part of the integrated subdivision law.³ The negative implication of the plain language of section 4402(5) is that a subdivision in violation of the statute, that has been in existence for less than twenty years, is subject to the provisions of the subchapter, including its enforcement provisions. [¶ 11] If, as UMF argues, a subdivision in violation of the subdivision statute was exempt from an enforcement action after six years pursuant to 14 M.R.S. § 752, it would be

meaningless to say that a subdivision in violation of that statute that has been in existence for twenty years is also exempted.

The legislative history of section 4402(5) confirms the applicability of its twenty-year statute of limitations to violations of subdivision approvals and subdivision ordinances. The bill that was enacted *186as subsection 4402(5) was titled, An Act to Impose a Statute of Limitations for Violations of Municipal Subdivision Ordinances.” L.D. 516 (118th Legis.

1997). The summary accompanying the enactment of section 4402(5) reads: “This bill places a statute of limitations on any action brought to enjoin the sale or other conveyance of land or a dwelling unit in a subdivision in violation of municipal ordinances unless the action is brought within 20 years of the initial violation.” L.D. 516, Summary (118th Legis.

1997). [¶ 12] Accordingly, the Town’s complaint was brought within the applicable limitations period.⁴ The entry is: Judgment vacated. Remanded for further proceedings consistent with this opinion.. It is likely that the sixty-foot reference addressed the anticipated right of way, not the driving surface of the roadway. Neither the appendix nor the record contain the local subdivision and road ordinances the Town so frequently mentions throughout its pleadings and brief, and upon which three out of its four claims are based.

Similarly, the Town did not provide a copy of the final subdivision plan that allegedly contains the requirement that UMF build a road, and upon which all four claims are based. M.R.App. P. 8(c) states, “[t]he purpose of the appendix is to make available to each justice of the court those documents from the record that are particularly important to the review of the issues on appeal.” Although it would have been advisable for the Town to provide copies of the local ordinances and the subdivision plan, because the sole issue before us can be decided on the materials submitted, these infirmities are not fatal to the Town’s appeal..

Title 14 M.R.S. § 752 (2006) is the default statute of limitations for civil actions, and states: All civil actions shall be commenced within 6 years after the cause of action accrues and not afterwards, except actions on a judgment or decree of any court of record of the United States, or of any state or of a justice of the peace in this State, and except as otherwise specially provided..

See generally Gorham Sav. Bank v. Balzley, 1998 ME 9, ¶ 7, 704 A.2d 398, 401 (“[t]he subdivision statute guides community development and protects and preserves the public’s health, safety, and general welfare by ensuring adequate provision for water, drainage, transportation, sewage disposal, and other necessities when land is committed for development.”)..

Having addressed the question of the applicable statute of limitations, we do not reach the Town’s separate claim that the alleged violation of the subdivision plan was a continuing violation of law, and that the statute of limitations in 14 M.R.S. § 752 should not bar prosecution of an action to enjoin and punish the continuing violation.

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