

COURT OF APPEALS OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

Bruni v. City of New York

2 N.Y.3d 319, 811 N.E.2d 19, 778 N.Y.S.2d 757 (2004) · Decided May 6, 2004

SUMMARY

The New York Court of Appeals held that internal documents prepared by the New York City Department of Environmental Protection constituted a written acknowledgment of a dangerous roadway condition under the City's Pothole Law. The Court further held that the trial court should have submitted the plaintiff's comparative negligence to the jury. It reversed the Appellate Division's dismissal and ordered a new trial.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Court of Appeals of the State of New York
WRITING FOR THE COURT	R.S. Smith, J.; Chief Judge Kaye; Judge G.B. Smith; Judge Ciparick; Judge Rosenblatt; Judge Graffeo; Judge Read
JURISDICTION	New York
DECIDED	May 6, 2004
DISPOSITION	reversed_and_remanded
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Plaintiff appealed after the Appellate Division reversed Supreme Court's judgment entered on a \$1.6 million jury verdict and dismissed the complaint. The Court of Appeals reversed the Appellate Division and ordered a new trial.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Whether the evidence presented a valid line of reasoning and permissible inferences from which a rational jury could find negligence; negligence and comparative negligence ordinarily present questions of fact for the jury.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published precedential opinion of the New York Court of Appeals
PARTIES	Joseph Bruni v. City of New York

TOPICS

- municipal liability
- negligence
- comparative fault
- statutory interpretation
- appellate procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether internal documents prepared by the New York City Department of Environmental Protection constituted a written acknowledgment from the City of the defective and dangerous condition under Administrative Code § 7-201(c), thereby satisfying the Pothole Law.
2. Whether Supreme Court erred by failing to submit Bruni's comparative negligence to the jury.

HOLDINGS

1. A written statement from the city agency responsible for repairing a roadway condition, showing firsthand knowledge of both the condition's existence and its dangerous nature, constitutes a written acknowledgment from the City under Administrative Code § 7-201(c). Such acknowledgment may come from an agency other than the Department of Transportation and may consist of an internal agency document.
2. Comparative negligence must be submitted to the jury when the evidence permits rational jurors to infer that the plaintiff failed to exercise due care and that the failure contributed to the accident, even though the evidence does not compel a finding of plaintiff negligence.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“We reject all three of the City's arguments and hold that a written statement showing that the city agency responsible for repairing a condition had first-hand knowledge both of the existence and the dangerous nature of the condition is an “acknowledgement” sufficient to satisfy the Pothole Law.” (at 324)

“In short, we hold that the documents relied on by plaintiff satisfy the “acknowledgement” requirement of paragraph (2) of the Pothole Law.” (at 327)

“We do hold, however, that the jury should have been asked whether plaintiff was negligent, and if so to what extent his negligence contributed to causing the accident.” (at 328)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

A complaint about a damaged or sunken catch basin at 11th Avenue and 62nd Street in Brooklyn was reported to the New York City Department of Environmental Protection. A DEP supervisor inspected the location, documented missing bricks and a street cave-in, determined that the condition was dangerous, and submitted a repair work order, but the defect was not repaired before the accident. Bruni later walked through the poorly lit area, stepped into the hole near the catch basin, and suffered a broken jaw and other injuries; the sawhorse and traffic cones reportedly placed around the hole were absent.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Bruni sued the City of New York for negligence after stepping into a street depression near a defective catch basin. Supreme Court denied the City's motion for a directed verdict based on the Pothole Law and denied the City's request for a comparative-negligence jury charge; the jury found for Bruni and awarded \$1.6 million. The

Appellate Division reversed and dismissed the complaint, concluding that internal DEP documents did not constitute a written acknowledgment under the Pothole Law. The Court of Appeals granted leave, reversed, and ordered a new trial.

DISPOSITION

reversed_and_remanded

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

Reverse the Appellate Division order and order a new trial, including submission to the jury of whether plaintiff was comparatively negligent and, if so, the extent to which his negligence contributed to the accident.

CASES CITED

- Laing v. City of New York, 71 N.Y.2d 912, 914 (1988)
- Willis v. Mott, 36 N.Y. 486, 491 (1867)
- Nallan v. Helmsley-Spear, Inc., 50 N.Y.2d 507, 517 (1980)