

SUPREME COURT OF WASHINGTON

Heinsma v. City of Vancouver, 144 Wash. 2d 556

29 P.3d 709 (2001) · No. No. 70895-9 · Decided August 23, 2001

SUMMARY

The Supreme Court of Washington held that the City of Vancouver's domestic partner benefits program did not violate article XI, section 11 of the Washington Constitution or conflict with RCW 41.04.180. The court concluded that the legislature had not preempted the city from defining dependents for its employee benefits program and that recognizing domestic partners for this limited purpose was a local matter. A dissent argued that the program impermissibly extended benefits to persons who were not statutory dependents.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Washington
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Owens, J.; Alexander, C.J.; Smith, J.; Johnson, J.; Madsen, J.; Ireland, J.; Bridge, J.; Chambers, J.; Sanders, J.
JURISDICTION	Washington
DECIDED	August 23, 2001
DOCKET	No. 70895-9
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Taxpayer sought declaratory relief challenging the constitutionality and statutory authority of the City of Vancouver's domestic-partner employee benefits program. Both parties moved for summary judgment; the trial court granted summary judgment to the City. The Washington Supreme Court accepted review by certification from the Court of Appeals.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court reviewed the summary judgment decision de novo and considered the validity of the municipal benefits program as a question of law.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published Washington Supreme Court en banc decision; precedential.
PARTIES	Roni Heinsma v. City of Vancouver

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether article XI, section 11 of the Washington Constitution or state law preempted the City of Vancouver from defining dependents for its employee benefits program to include domestic partners.
2. Whether the City's inclusion of domestic partners in the term dependents directly and irreconcilably conflicted with RCW 41.04.180.
3. Whether the City's limited recognition of domestic partnerships for employee benefits impermissibly interfered with the State's authority to regulate marriage and familial relationships.

HOLDINGS

1. RCW 41.04.180 did not expressly or impliedly preempt the City of Vancouver from defining who qualifies as a dependent for purposes of municipal employee benefits.
2. The City's inclusion of domestic partners as dependents was consistent with the statute and did not directly and irreconcilably conflict with RCW 41.04.180.
3. The City's limited recognition of domestic partnerships for employee benefits did not interfere with the State's authority to regulate marriage and familial relationships.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Because the regulation of employee benefits is a matter of local concern, we recognize that cities should have great latitude in implementing their employee benefits programs, especially when they have received specific delegated authority from the legislature.” (715)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Beginning in May 1998, Vancouver offered health insurance benefits to domestic partners of city employees and permitted employees to use sick leave to care for domestic partners and their children. Eligibility required an affidavit establishing, among other things, an intimate relationship, shared residence, and joint responsibility for basic living expenses. Heinsma, a city taxpayer and resident, challenged the program after the City spent at least \$20,000 in tax funds on the benefits.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Heinsma filed an action in the trial court alleging that the City's extension of employee health and sick-leave benefits to domestic partners and their children violated article XI, section 11 of the Washington Constitution and exceeded RCW 41.04.180. The trial court granted the City summary judgment, concluding that employee benefits were a matter of local concern and that the program was constitutional. The Court of Appeals matter was certified to and accepted for review by the Washington Supreme Court, which affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- City of Spokane v. Portch, 92 Wash. 2d 342, 596 P.2d 1044 (1979)
- Lenci v. City of Seattle, 63 Wash. 2d 664, 388 P.2d 926 (1964)
- Massie v. Brown, 84 Wash. 2d 490, 527 P.2d 476 (1974)
- City of Bothell v. Gutschmidt, 78 Wash. App. 654, 898 P.2d 864 (1995)
- Brown v. City of Yakima, 116 Wash. 2d 556, 807 P.2d 353 (1991)
- Arlington County v. White, 259 Va. 708, 528 S.E.2d 706 (2000)
- Hite v. Pub. Util. Dist. No. 2, 112 Wash. 2d 456, 772 P.2d 481 (1989)
- State ex rel. Beck v. Carter, 2 Wash. App. 974, 471 P.2d 127 (1970)
- Ayers v. City of Tacoma, 6 Wash. 2d 545, 108 P.2d 348 (1940)
- City of Seattle v. Auto Sheet Metal Workers Local 387, 27 Wash. App. 669, 620 P.2d 119 (1980)
- City of Pasco v. Pub. Employment Relations Comm'n, 119 Wash. 2d 504, 833 P.2d 381 (1992)
- In re Pers. Restraint of Piercy, 101 Wash. 2d 490, 681 P.2d 223 (1984)
- City of Seattle v. Williams, 128 Wash. 2d 341, 908 P.2d 359 (1995)
- Seattle Newspaper-Web Pressmen's Union Local No. 26 v. City of Seattle, 24 Wash. App. 462, 604 P.2d 170 (1979)
- Winkenwerder v. City of Yakima, 52 Wash. 2d 617, 328 P.2d 873 (1958)
- Chem. Bank v. Wash. Pub. Power Supply Sys., 99 Wash. 2d 772, 666 P.2d 329 (1983)
- Slattery v. City of New York, 266 A.D.2d 24, 697 N.Y.S.2d 603 (1999)