

BEFORE THE WASHINGTON STATE
EXECUTIVE ETHICS BOARD

In the Matter of:

PAULETTE NELSON,

Respondent.

No. 06-035

STIPULATED FACTS,
CONCLUSIONS AND ORDER

I. STIPULATION

THIS STIPULATION is entered into under WAC 292-100-090(1) between the Respondent, PAULETTE NELSON, and Board Staff of the WASHINGTON STATE EXECUTIVE ETHICS BOARD (Board) through MELANIE DeLEON, Executive Director. The following stipulated facts, conclusions, and agreed order will be binding upon the parties if fully executed, and if accepted by the Board without modification(s), and will not be binding if rejected by the Board, or if the Respondent does not accept the Board's proposed modification(s), if any, to the stipulation.

Section 1: PROCEDURAL FACTS

1.1. On January 25, 2006, the Executive Ethics Board received a complaint alleging that Paulette Nelson, an Administrative Assistant with the State of Washington, Department of Natural Resources, may have violated the Ethics in Public Service Act, RCW 42.52, when she used her state computer to run an outside business.

1.2. The Board is authorized under RCW 34.05.060 to establish procedures for attempting and executing informal settlement of matters in lieu of more formal proceedings under the Administrative Procedures Act, including adjudicative hearings. The Board has established such procedures under WAC 292-100-090.

1.3. Paulette Nelson understands that if Board staff proves any or all of the alleged violations at a hearing, the Board may impose sanctions, including a civil penalty under RCW 42.52.480(1)(b) of up to \$5,000, or the greater of three times the economic value of anything received or sought in violation of chapter 42.52 RCW, for each violation found. The Board may also order the payment of costs, including reasonable investigative costs, under RCW 42.52.480(1)(c).

1.4. Paulette Nelson recognizes that the evidence available to the Board staff is such that the Board may conclude she violated the Ethics in Public Service Act. Therefore, in the interest of seeking an informal and expeditious resolution of this matter, the parties agree to entry of the stipulated findings of fact, conclusions of law and agreed order set forth below.

1.5. Paulette Nelson waives the opportunity for a hearing, contingent upon acceptance of this stipulation by the Board, or her acceptance of any modification(s) proposed by the Board, pursuant to the provisions of WAC 292-100-090(2) which provides in part:

The board has the option of accepting, rejecting, or modifying the proposed stipulation or asking for additional facts to be presented. If the board accepts the stipulation or modifies the stipulation with the agreement of the respondent, the board shall enter an order in conformity with the terms of the stipulation. If the board rejects the stipulation or the respondent does not agree to the board's proposed modifications to the stipulation, the normal process will continue. The proposed stipulation and information obtained during formal settlement discussions shall not be admitted into evidence at a subsequent public hearing.

1.6. If the Board accepts this stipulation, the Board will release and discharge Paulette Nelson from all further ethics proceedings under chapter 42.52 RCW for matters arising out of the facts contained in the complaint in this matter, subject to payment of the full amount of the civil penalty due and owing, any other costs imposed, and compliance with all other terms and conditions of the agreed order. Paulette Nelson in turn agrees to release and discharge the Board, its officers, agents and employees from all claims, damages, and causes of action arising out of this complaint and this stipulation and agreed order.

1.7. If this Stipulation is accepted, this Stipulation and Order does not purport to settle any other claims between Paulette Nelson and the Washington State Executive Ethics Board, the State of Washington, or other third party, which may be filed in the future.

1.8. If this Stipulation is accepted, this Stipulation and Order is enforceable under RCW 34.05.578 and any other applicable statutes or rules.

1.9. If the Board rejects this stipulation, or if Paulette Nelson does not accept the Board's proposed modification(s), if any, Paulette Nelson waives any objection to participation at any subsequent hearing by any Board member to whom this stipulation was presented for approval under WAC 292-100-090(2). Further, Paulette Nelson understands and agrees that this proposed stipulation and information obtained during any formal settlement discussions held between the parties shall not be admitted into evidence at a subsequent public hearing, unless otherwise agreed by the parties.

Section 2: FINDINGS OF FACT

2.1. At all times pertinent, Paulette Nelson has been employed as an Administrative Assistant at the Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

2.2. In January 2006, the Board received a complaint that alleged that Paulette Nelson was running a Persian cat business using her state computer.

2.3. The contents of Ms. Nelson's computer hard drive were reviewed by Board staff. Dozens of pictures of cats were found stored on the hard drive of Paulette Nelson's state computer. Also, emails from individuals inquiring about Ms. Nelson's Persian cats were found stored on her state computer.

Section 3: CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

3.1. Pursuant to chapter 42.52 RCW, the Executive Ethics Board has jurisdiction over Paulette Nelson and over the subject matter of this complaint.

3.2. Pursuant to WAC 292-100-090(1), the parties have the authority to resolve this matter under the terms contained herein, subject to Board approval.

3.3. A state officer or employee is prohibited under RCW 42.52.160 from using state resources for personal benefit. There is no evidence that Paulette Nelson used her state computer to operate an outside business, however, she did use state resources to store dozens of cat pictures and several emails that inquired about her cats.

3.4. Based on Findings of Fact 2.1 through 2.3, Paulette Nelson used state resources in violation of RCW 42.52.160.

3.5. The Board is authorized to impose sanctions for violations to the Ethics Act pursuant to RCW 42.52.360. The Board has set forth criteria in WAC 292-120-030 for imposing sanctions and consideration of any mitigating or aggravating factors.

Section 4: MITIGATING FACTORS

4.1. It is a mitigating factor that Paulette Nelson transferred the files inadvertently. Ms. Nelson explained that she was responsible for the budget for her office. To avoid interruptions, it was her custom to work on the budget at home, with the permission of her supervisor. She transferred files back and forth between her personal and state computers via a personal thumb drive. Ms. Nelson acknowledged that at some point when she was transferring files between the thumb drive and her state computer she inadvertently transferred her cat pictures and some personal emails to her state computer.

Section 5: AGREED ORDER

5.1 For the violation of RCW 42.52.160, Paulette Nelson will pay a civil penalty in the amount of one hundred fifty dollars (\$150.00). The Board agrees to suspend one hundred dollars (\$100.00) on the condition that Paulette Nelson complies with all terms and conditions of this Stipulation and Order and commits no further violations of chapter 42.52 RCW for a period of two years from the date this agreement is executed.

5.2. The civil penalty of \$50.00 is payable to the state Executive Ethics Board within forty-five (45) days of approval of this Stipulation and Order by the Board or as otherwise agreed to by the parties.

CERTIFICATION

I, Paulette Nelson hereby certify that I have read this Stipulation and Agreed Order in its entirety; that my counsel of record, if any, has fully explained the legal significance and consequence of it; that I fully understand and agree to all of it; and that it may be presented to the Board without my appearance. I knowingly and voluntarily waive my right to a hearing in this matter; and if the Board accepts the Stipulation and Agreed Order, I understand that I will receive a signed copy.

Paulette Nelson 5-5-2010
Paulette Nelson Date
Respondent

Stipulated to and presented by:

Melanie deLeon 5-5-10
Melanie deLeon Date
Executive Director

II. ORDER

Having reviewed the proposed Stipulation, WE, THE STATE OF WASHINGTON EXECUTIVE ETHICS BOARD, pursuant to WAC 292-100-090, HEREBY ORDER that the Stipulation is

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ACCEPTED in its entirety;

REJECTED in its entirety;

MODIFIED. This Stipulation will become the Order of the Board if the

Respondent approves* the following modification(s):

