

STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
COUNTY OF WAKE

IN THE GENERAL COURT OF JUSTICE
SUPERIOR COURT DIVISION
CASE NO. 18-CVS-9565

ERICA LEWIS and JOSEPH LEWIS, on behalf)
of themselves and all others similarly situated,)

Plaintiffs,)

v.)

BRIDGE PROPERTY MANAGEMENT, LLC,)
BRIDGE PROPERTY MANAGEMENT, L.C.,)
ROC III NC MISSION CAPITAL CROSSING,)
LLC d/b/a MISSION CAPITAL CROSSING,)

Defendants.)

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**ORDER APPROVING FINAL SETTLEMENT AND
AWARDING ATTORNEYS' FEES, EXPENSES AND SERVICE AWARD**

THIS MATTER comes before the Court on Plaintiffs Erica Lewis and Joseph Lewis ("Plaintiffs") unopposed motion for final approval of class action settlement and approval of Class Counsel's attorneys' fee request and reimbursement of expenses and request for approval of a service award pursuant to the Settlement Agreement entered into with Bridge Property Management, LLC, Bridge Property Management, L.C., and ROC III NC Mission Capital Crossing, LLC d/b/a Mission Capital Crossing ("Defendants") dated February 27, 2020 (the "Settlement Agreement") in the above-captioned matter ("the Settlement").

On May 18, 2020, the Court held a hearing and was satisfied as to the fairness, reasonableness, and adequacy of the Settlement, and the fairness and reasonableness of the fees, expenses, and service awards provided herein. Therefore, having considered the supporting materials submitted to the Court which includes the Affidavits and supporting memorandum, discussions with counsel during the hearing, and other appropriate matters of record, concludes

that good cause exists to grant Final Approval of the Settlement. Therefore, the Court GRANTS the Final Approval, APPROVES the Settlement, APPROVES the attorneys' fee award, APPROVES the reimbursement of expenses, and APPROVES the Service Award Request to the named Plaintiffs Erica Lewis and Joseph Lewis. The grounds supporting these rulings follow.

BACKGROUND

1. Plaintiffs, through counsel, filed their complaint on July 30, 2018, individually and on behalf of North Carolina tenants who were threatened, charged and paid Eviction Fees in violation of North Carolina law between July 30, 2014 and June 25, 2018 (the "Relevant Time Period").¹

2. The Action brought four claims for relief: a violation of the North Carolina Residential Rental Agreements Act (N.C.G.S. § 42-46), a violation of the North Carolina Debt Collection Act (N.C.G.S. § 75-50, *et seq.*), a violation of the North Carolina Unfair and Deceptive Trade Practices Act (N.C.G.S. § 75-1.1, *et seq.*), Petition for Injunction (N.C.G.S. § 1-485, *et seq.*), and Declaratory Judgment (N.C.G.S. § 1-253, *et seq.*).

3. On August 15, 2018, Defendants answered Plaintiffs' Complaint, denying any wrongdoing and raising affirmative defenses.

4. Prior to Plaintiffs' complaint, on June 25, 2018, an amendment to N.C.G.S. § 42-46 was ratified and made into law (the "Amendment").

5. The Amendment added two subsections to § 42-46 – (i) and (j) – which authorized landlords to charge and recover out-of-pocket expenses including Eviction Fees and to include these amounts in the amount required to cure a default.

¹ The Relevant Time Period corresponds with the four-year statute of limitations for Plaintiff's claims under the North Carolina Debt Collection Act, N.C.G.S. § 75-50 *et seq.* through June 25, 2018 § 42-46 Amendment (Session Law 2018-50).

6. After exchanging initial discovery regarding Defendants' policies and procedures and the size of the respective classes, the Parties mediated the case with retired North Carolina Court of Appeals Judge Douglas McCullough in Raleigh, North Carolina on January 17, 2020.

7. The Parties thereafter drafted formal settlement documents (hereafter, the "Settlement Agreement") to resolve all claims brought on behalf of Plaintiffs and those similarly situated.

8. The Parties were able to formalize all of the Settlement documents on February 27, 2020, and it was submitted for preliminary approval.

9. The hearing on preliminary approval occurred on March 2, 2020.

10. Pursuant to the plan approved by the Court, notice was disseminated to the classes.

11. Any exclusions or objections were to be submitted by May 1, 2020.

12. Based upon the Affidavit of Danielle Bracy with Angeion Group ("Angeion"), the Claims Administrator, there have been no opt outs or objections.

SETTLEMENT TERMS

13. In broad brush strokes, the settlement provides significant benefits to two classes: the Collection Letter Class and the Eviction Fee Class.

14. Collection Letter Class members are defined as all natural persons who (a) at any point between July 30, 2014 and June 25, 2018, (b) resided in any of the properties in North Carolina owned and/or managed by Defendants and (c) received a Collection Letter.

15. A Collection Letter is defined as any letter sent by Defendants to Settlement Class members during the Relevant Time Period that asserts that Settlement Class Members will either (a) be charged with Eviction Fees upon the filing of a summary ejectment action or (b) that Eviction Fees are owed.

16. The Eviction Fee Class is defined as all natural persons who (a) at any point between July 30, 2014 and June 25, 2018, (b) resided in any of the properties in North Carolina owned and/or managed by Defendant and (c) were charged and (d) paid Eviction Fees.

17. The Settlement Agreement provides Monetary Relief and/or Non-Monetary Relief. Monetary Relief is composed of \$510,000.00 in cash.

18. The Non-Monetary Relief consists of the Set Asides and Dismissals, which will allow any member of the Settlement Class against whom a judgment for possession at one of Defendants' Properties was obtained by Defendants or its affiliates during the Class Period to remove such judgment from his or her record.

19. Collection Letter Class members could claim \$50 for each Collection Letter received from Defendants, up to a total of \$150.

20. The Settlement Agreement allotted \$35,000.00 in Monetary Relief to claims made by the Collection Letter Class Members.

21. If the amount allotted to the Collection Letter Class was undersubscribed, then any amounts remaining would be redistributed equally to the Eviction Fee Class Members.

22. Based upon the claims received by the Settlement Administration and subject to confirmation that there are no duplicates, the Collection Letter Class members have made claims for approximately \$4,100.00 of the \$35,000.00 allotted. Therefore, the remaining amount will be allocated to the Eviction Fee Class.

23. Eviction Fee Class members were expected to receive \$605.00 for being charged Eviction Fees, subject to pro rata increase based on Settlement Class participation in the settlement.

24. Since there were less claims for the Collection Letter Class members, the Eviction Fee Class Members will now receive approximately \$655.00², and they will not have to file a claim.

25. In addition, the Settlement allowed Settlement Class members to freely request the Non-Monetary Relief, which allows the claimant to receive *Consent Motions to Set Aside Judgment for Possession Pursuant to Rule 60(b)(5) and Stipulations of Dismissal*, (the “Set-Aside and Dismissal”).

26. Obtaining a Set-Aside and Dismissal would generally cost a tenant between \$1,000.00 and \$2,000.00 if a private attorney was retained to handle it individually.

27. According to the Claims Administrator, 8 class members requested a Set-Aside.

28. As defined in the Settlement Agreement and used herein:

- (a) “Released Persons” means Defendants, along with their parent companies, lenders, insurers, investors, affiliates, suppliers, successors, assigns, subsidiaries, related entities and trustees and/or beneficiaries of trusts which have an interest in the above referenced company; and/or any current, past or future owners, members, directors, officers, employees, attorneys, accountants, direct and indirect shareholders, partners, members, or agents of the foregoing, as well as any and all entities with a current interest in any apartment complex in which any Settlement Class Member resided to the extent such apartment complex was owned or managed by Defendants during the Relevant Time Period;
- (b) “Released Claims” means any and all claims, demands, actions, allegations, suits, causes of action, theories of liability, damages whenever incurred, and

²If some units were leased by multiple people, then the award will be split pro rata. For instance, if there were two tenants who were charged and paid Eviction Fees, then the approximate \$655.00 will be split between the two tenants.

the liabilities of any nature whatsoever, including costs, expenses, restitution, punitive damages, exemplary damages, compensatory damages, incidental damages, pecuniary damages, fines, penalties, and attorneys' fees, known or unknown, suspected or unsuspected, whether past, present or future, in law or in equity, in tort or in contract, that Class Releasors, whether or not they object to this Settlement or make a claim upon or participate in the Settlement, ever had, now has, or hereafter can, shall, or may have, directly, indirectly, representatively, derivatively, or in any capacity, arising out of or relating in any way to the charging, threatening to charge, collecting, or attempting to collect Eviction Fees or any Outstanding Debt; and

- (c) "Class Releasors" means each Settlement Class Member, as well as each Settlement Class Member's predecessors, successors, heirs, executors, trustees, legal representatives, administrators, agents and assigns.

APPROVAL OF CLASS NOTICE

29. The Settlement Classes have been notified of the settlement pursuant to the plan approved by the Court. After having reviewed the Post-Notice Declaration of the Settlement Administrator, which was responsible for carrying out the notice program, the Court hereby finds that the notice was accomplished in accordance with the Court's directive.

30. The Court further finds that the notice program constituted the best practicable notice to the Settlement Classes under the circumstances and fully satisfies the requirements of North Carolina Rule of Civil Procedure 23, due process and applicable law, and it is further determined that all members of the Settlement Class are bound by the Order and Final Judgment herein.

APPROVAL OF THE SETTLEMENT

31. The Court finds that the parties' settlement is fair, reasonable and adequate in accordance with North Carolina Rules of Civil Procedure 23; was reached at arm's length without collusion or fraud; and satisfies all of the requirements for final approval.

32. The Court has considered the complexity, expense and likely duration of the litigation if the settlement is not approved; the odds of the plaintiff succeeding at trial balanced by the risks of continued litigation; the range of possible recovery if the case is tried; the opinions of Class Counsel and the class representative; and the degree of opposition to the settlement.

33. The Court recognizes that no Settlement Class member objected to the settlement and no Class Member has opted-out of the settlement or has filed a valid and timely request for exclusion.

34. In light of the same, the settlement is finally approved and the parties are directed to consummate the settlement in accordance with its terms.

CERTIFICATION OF THE SETTLEMENT CLASSES

35. The Court hereby certifies the Collection Letter Class and the Eviction Fee Class.

36. The Collection Letter Class is defined as "all natural persons who (a) at any point between July 30, 2014 and June 25, 2018, (b) resided in any of the properties in North Carolina owned and/or managed by Defendants and (c) received a letter that threatened that Defendants would file a summary ejectment lawsuit, eviction action, or notice to vacate the premises if the person failed to make a complete rental payment and that once the summary ejectment lawsuit was filed, the tenant would be charged Eviction Fees in order to dismiss the eviction action."

37. The Eviction Fee Class is defined as “all natural persons who (a) at any point between July 30, 2014 and June 25, 2018, (b) resided in any of the properties in North Carolina owned and/or managed by Defendants and (c) were charged and (d) actually paid Eviction Fees.”

38. Excluded from the Settlement Classes are (1) persons who are employees, directors, officers, and agents of Defendants; (2) persons who timely and properly exclude themselves from the Settlement Classes as provided in this Agreement; (3) anyone who has previously executed a written release of all claims against Defendants related to the collecting or threatening to collect Eviction Fees and would otherwise be a member of the Settlement Classes; and (4) the Court, the Court’s immediate family, and Court staff.

39. Based on the record before the Court, the Court hereby finds that the Plaintiffs are adequate representatives of the Settlement Classes.

40. In so holding, the Court finds that the prerequisites of North Carolina Rule 23 of Civil Procedure has been satisfied for certification of the Settlement Classes for settlement purposes only: the Settlement Classes, which contain hundreds of members, are so numerous that joinder of all members is impracticable; there are questions of law and fact common to the Settlement Classes; the claims of the Class Representative are typical of the claims of the absent Settlement Class members; the Class Representative and Class Counsel have and will adequately and fairly protect the interests of the Settlement Classes with regard to the claims of the Settlement Classes; and common questions of law and fact predominate over questions affecting only individual Settlement Class members, rendering the Settlement Classes sufficiently cohesive to warrant a class settlement.

41. In making all of the foregoing findings, the Court has exercised its discretion in certifying the Settlement Classes.

42. The Court appoints Scott C. Harris and Patrick M. Wallace of Whitfield Bryson LLP, and Edward H. Maginnis and Karl S. Gwaltney of Maginnis Law, PLLC, as Class counsel. The Court appoints Erica and Joseph Lewis as Class Representatives.

ATTORNEYS' FEES AND EXPENSES

43. The Settlement also provides that Defendants will not contest Settlement Class Counsel's application to the Court for payment of attorneys' fees up to the amount of \$170,000.00. The requested attorneys' fees amounts a 1/3 of the total value of the Settlement. This amount was negotiated only after the substantive terms of the Settlement were agreed upon. The enforceability of the Settlement was not contingent upon this amount being awarded.

44. While a court may not modify a contractual attorneys' fees arrangement reached in a settlement of a Rule 23 class action, it nevertheless must review the fees sought for reasonableness and must approve any fees paid by way of settlement. *Ehrenhaus v. Baker*, 216 N.C. App. 59, 74 (2011) ("While any 'compromise' in a class action must be reviewed by a court, a court cannot modify a purely contractual settlement."). Here, the parties agreed that Class Counsel could apply to the Court for an award of attorneys' fees up to 1/3 of the total Settlement.

45. The determination of the amount of attorneys' fees to be awarded is in the sound discretion of the Court. *G.E. Betz, Inc. v. Conrad*, 231 N.C. App. 214, 242 (2013). Accordingly, the issue before the Court is whether Class Counsel's request for \$170,000.00 in fees is reasonable.

46. The Court notes that common fund cases like Class Counsel have created in this case routinely result in attorneys' fees being awarded under a percentage of the fund method. *See Faulkenbury v. Teachers' & State Employees' Retirement Sys.*, 345 N.C. 683, 483 S.E.2d 422 (1997) (holding that the common-fund doctrine applied to a change in calculation of benefits

under the State's retirement system resulting in the creation of a recovery fund). "As such, we are persuaded that the recovery at issue in this case properly constitutes a common fund for purposes of shifting attorney's fees under the common-fund doctrine of *Horner* and its progeny." *Bailey*, 348 N.C. 130, 162, at 500.

47. The North Carolina Business Court in *Byers v. Carpenter*, 1998 NCBC LEXIS 3, **32 (January 30, 1998) held that the appropriate level of compensation in cases such as these is typically 25% of the relief obtained if the case is settled before filing; one-third if after filing; and 40% if after an appeal has been taken.

48. This action settled after filing of the complaint, answer, and involved discovery in the complex issues into the case, and after a lengthy mediation as well as further negotiations.

49. Under *Byers*, and the above cited case law, Class Counsel's attorneys' fee request is well within the range of reasonable fees in this state.

50. In addition, the declaration of Class Counsel, Scott Harris, indicates the extensive work performed by the parties in seeking to resolve this litigation.

51. Since the attorneys' fee request is unopposed by Defendants, and Class Counsel have provided sufficient information and evidence to establish the reasonableness of their fee request under *Byers* and other relevant North Carolina case law submitted in their other briefing.

52. Settlement Class Counsel worked comprehensively and extensively for over a year and a half on the case and related cases and anticipate working more to effectuate the Settlement and assist Settlement Class members in receiving the settlement benefits.

53. Class Counsel also has established that they obtained a highly favorable result for the Settlement Class by providing monetary and non-monetary benefits.

54. Settlement Class Counsel provided sufficient information to establish their experience, skill, and ability to successfully conduct complex litigation.

55. The skill and labor required to litigate this action also favorably weighs in Settlement Class Counsel's favor.

56. After carefully reviewing the foregoing, the Court finds, in its discretion, that \$170,000.00 is a reasonable attorney fee.

57. Plaintiffs' counsel requested reimbursement of expenses of \$3,650.80 are also reasonable under the circumstances and the Court in its discretion awards the full amount of these expenses.

58. Accordingly, the Court grants to Class Counsel should be awarded \$173,650.80 in attorneys' fees and reimbursement of expenses. This amount will be paid in accordance with the parties' Settlement Agreement.

SERVICE AWARD

59. The Settlement Agreement provides that Defendants, subject to Court approval, will pay \$2,500 each up to \$5,000.00 total for Erica and Joseph Lewis as Class Representatives.

60. The Court finds that payment of a service award is appropriate in this case in light of their work on behalf of the Settlement Classes and that no Settlement Class member has objected to the service award.

61. The Court hereby approves the service award, which shall be paid consistent with the parties' Settlement Agreement.

CY PRES

62. In the event that Settlement Class members fail to cash their checks within six (6) months of mailing, as provided in the Settlement Agreement, such that the Settlement Fund has a positive balance, all remaining amounts in the Settlement Fund shall be disbursed to North

Carolina Advocates for Justice. The Claims Administrator is ordered to provide a report to Class Counsel of all money in the Settlement Fund left undisbursed within fifteen (15) calendar days after the 6-month period has elapsed.

THEREFORE, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED, ADJUDGED, and DECREED AS FOLLOWS:

1. Pursuant to Rule 23 of North Carolina Rules of Civil Procedure, the Court hereby finally approves in all respects the Settlement set forth in the Settlement Agreement, and finds that the Settlement, the Settlement Agreement, and the plan of distribution of the Settlement funds are in all respects fair, reasonable, and adequate, and are in the best interest of the settlement class.

2. Class Counsel is hereby awarded attorneys' fees in the amount of \$170,000.00 from Defendants to be paid from the Settlement Fund as set forth in the manner described in Settlement Agreement, which amount the Court finds to be fair and reasonable.

3. Class Counsel are also awarded a reimbursement of their expenses of \$3,650.80

4. The Court also finds to be fair and reasonable service award of \$2,500 to Erica Lewis and \$2,500 to Joseph Lewis to be paid from the Settlement Fund.

5. In addition, the Claims Administrator has projected a total budget of up to \$48,000.00 to fully administer the notice plan and effectuate the payment of the settlement to the class members. Since the Claims Administrator has been paid \$40,000 already, they will be reimbursed up to \$48,000.00 from the Settlement Fund. Any amounts unused for the administration of the Settlement will be distributed to the *Cy Pres* recipient.

6. Since no member of the Class has objected or opted out of the Settlement, the Effective Date of the Settlement Agreement is the date of the signing of this order, and the Class Releasers shall release and forever discharge the Released Persons from the Released Claims.

7. By reason of the settlement, and there being no just reason for delay, the Court hereby enters final judgment in this matter and all claims alleged by Plaintiffs are dismissed with prejudice.

8. Without affecting the finality of this judgment, the Court retains continuing and exclusive jurisdiction over all matters relating to the administration, consummation, enforcement, and interpretation of the Settlement Agreement and of this Final Order and Judgment, to protect and effectuate this Final Order and Judgment, and for any other necessary purpose.

9. Pursuant to the terms of the Settlement Agreement, this action is dismissed with prejudice as against the Class Representatives, all members of the Settlement Classes and the Defendants and Released Persons.

10. The parties shall bear their own costs except as provided by the Settlement Agreement and as ordered herein.

11. It is further adjudged that the Class Representatives shall be deemed conclusively to have compromised, settled, discharged, dismissed, and released any and all rights, claims, or causes of action against Released Persons as provided for in the Settlement Agreement.

IT IS SO ORDERED this 18 day of May, 2020.



Superior Court Judge Presiding