

# New Jersey Herald

## Public needs to know truth about beating of jail inmate

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A recently released internal memo offers a reason why the county agreed to settle a lawsuit filed by a former jail inmate for \$150,000: Because it could have been much more.

An insurance attorney, John Gonzo, who recommended the settlement, told the county freeholders in September that Robert Woodruff, who alleged he was beaten by other inmates while in custody at the county jail, had a "strong civil rights case."

As a summary recap, Woodruff was sentenced to a four-year state prison term in 2013 after pleading guilty to his involvement in a string of burglaries in Highland Lakes during the summer of 2012. Among that string was the home of a Sussex County jail officer. Due to the conflict, a Sussex County judge ordered Woodruff be held in Warren County up to and after his sentencing until he could be transferred to state prison.

But somehow, on April 30, 2013, Woodruff ended up in the Sussex County jail, where "unknown inmates improperly entered Woodruff's cell and physically assaulted him," according to charges in Woodruff's lawsuit.

Woodruff's lawsuit claimed the attack was "purposefully arranged" by jail authorities in retaliation for Woodruff burglarizing the home of one of their own.

The briefing memo to freeholders also said the now-retired sergeant in charge of processing Woodruff's paperwork knew that Woodruff was not supposed be in the Sussex County jail and gave a "rather weak" explanation as to why that happened, adding that the sergeant "would make a horrible witness" if the case went to trial.

The memo indicates that Woodruff was transported to Sussex County on that day for proceedings, which included entering his guilty plea. Instead of returning him to Warren County, Woodruff was kept overnight in the Sussex County jail when the incident occurred.

However, Woodruff's attorney, Jeff Patti, has since said there was never any reason for Woodruff to be in Sussex County, much less in the Sussex County jail, on that day.

In a letter responding to the story in the New Jersey Herald about the internal memo, Patti said: "Woodruff was sentenced on April 19, 2013, in Sussex County and was ordered back to the Warren County jail pending pick up by the New Jersey Department of Corrections. Eleven days later, without any legal authority Sussex County Sheriff's officers brought Mr. Woodruff back to the Sussex County jail and lodged him overnight where he was allowed to be violently assaulted by other inmates."

The memo also noted that none of the corrections officers assigned to the floor where Woodruff was housed from the time of his arrival through his eventual transfer to state prison were able to identify the inmates responsible for the assault.

Presumably, Woodruff's lawsuit has been settled by the settlement, but questions remain that deserve answers. Those answers should come from the results of an investigation being conducted by the Sussex County Prosecutor's Office, which, amazingly, was not even aware of the 2013 incident, the resulting

lawsuit filed in 2015 or the September 2017 settlement until a story was published in The Herald. Even the freeholders were unaware until shortly before hearing the settlement options.

Describing the incident, Patti said Woodruff was "punched and kicked about the face and body," causing among other injuries a lacerated lip, and then was left overnight for 12 hours in his cell "bleeding profusely in excruciating pain."

Meanwhile, George Daggett, the attorney representing Sheriff Michael Strada during the investigation, said the settlement "to an inmate who got a fat lip is a political maneuver to embarrass the sheriff."

Daggett, in a press release, said that "some lawyer's memo" released along with freeholders' minutes was an indication of retaliation against Strada, who in June had pointed out that the freeholders were improperly interfering with operation of the sheriff's office by their failure to allocate funding to the department.

The investigation may take various turns as it threads through the various allegations and counter-arguments. But regardless of the path, it must lead to public disclosure of its findings.