

Local News

District approves settlement for teens

Students say they were mistreated by football coaches

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Two former Santa Barbara High School football players will split \$128,000 in a settlement of claims that they were mistreated by coaches and then subjected to harassment, humiliation and retaliation by peers after complaining of the alleged abuses.

The school board's 4-0 approval of the settlement terms, during a closed session Tuesday night, staves off potential lawsuits on behalf of teenagers Luke Menchaca and Billy Toner, who now attend Carpinteria High School. However, the school district admitted no liability in a written statement read to the audience by President Nancy Harter when the board's regular meeting began.

"These settlements . . . will avoid the necessity and expenses of litigation," she stated. "The key provisions of the settlement call for each of the two students to receive a payment of \$64,000, including attorneys' fees."

The district will pay \$28,000. Its insurer, Southern California Relief, will cover the remaining \$100,000.

Written claims filed on the teenagers' behalf in February alleged misconduct by head football coach Craig Moropoulos and assistant coach Lito Garcia. Each young man allegedly suffered a "variety of physical and emotional injuries, illness, humiliation, damage to reputation, and loss of self esteem, as well as associated economic loss" as a result of the coaches' "wrongful and unlawful actions," the claims alleged.

The families contended the district was liable for unspecified damages because more should have been done to prevent the alleged physical and verbal abuse and subsequent retaliation.

The varsity players claimed school life became so difficult after their complaints became public that they transferred to the other school. For months they had endured "unlawful harassment and retaliation from employees and students of Santa Barbara High School," according to their written claims.

The coaches -- as well as coach Giorgio Volpi, who was not named in the claims -- were temporarily placed on paid administrative leave while administrators investigated the misconduct allegations, first detailed in a Nov. 20, 2002, letter to district Superintendent Deborah Flores by an attorney for the Toner family. At the time, Mr. Moropoulos denied any wrongdoing.

All three coaches later returned to work. But in November, Mr. Garcia decided to stop coaching football at Santa Barbara High, citing family reasons. He remains the school's athletic director.

After conducting her own investigation, the superintendent announced in January that she found evidence to support six of the 10 allegations against the coaches. All three coaches would be "subjected to appropriate disciplinary action," she said, but not dismissed.

"It is not acceptable in this district for coaches or players to use profane, obscene, demeaning language," she said then, "(or) for coaches to use physical force or physical contact at any time except to protect a player."

The coaches were required to undergo anger-management classes and sensitivity training.

James Herman and Janean Daniels, attorneys representing the Toner and Menchaca families, respectively, could not be reached for comment Tuesday. Pedro Menchaca, Luke Menchaca's father, declined comment on the settlement.

William and Patricia Toner, Billy Toner's parents, could not be reached and did not return a News-Press call to their home.

Mr. Moropoulos also could not be reached, but his attorney, Michael Cooney, said he had discussed the settlement details with the coach.

"I think the predominant feeling is he just wants get this behind him," the lawyer said. "We feel the district is opting for practicality over principle, but it's their call."

He said Mr. Moropoulos would "like to have his day in court, but the legal system is such that (going to trial) often costs more than a settlement. That appears to be the case here."

Mr. Garcia was out of town and could not be reached for comment Tuesday night.

As part of the settlement, all parties agreed "not to make negative statements about each other."

The school district also agreed to provide counseling, if needed by students, for the rest of this school year and to write a letter thanking and acknowledging the two teenagers "for raising issues."