

AGSTATE: Company denies all of Ramos's claims filed in lawsuit

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ment “were taken for legitimate non-discriminatory and non-retaliatory business reasons.”

Ploeger claims her clients acted in good faith at all times with Ramos. And she claims Flynn failed to state valid claims that could be brought to a jury trial.

AgState also denied nearly every one of Ramos's allegations.

Ramos's attorney, Megan Flynn of Des Moines, sued AgState and three of its lead employees in Buena Vista County District Court on May 12. Flynn lodged claims of discrimination based on race, sex and age under the Iowa Civil Rights Act. Ramos claimed at least three of her superiors fostered a “hostile work environment” rife with bigotry, harassment and retaliation, according to the lawsuit.

Flynn claims AgState's “hostile” work culture forced her client to “constructively discharge her employment.”

Ramos, a Storm Lake city councilwoman, started working as an HR talent manager at AgState's Albert City branch in May 2022. She became an HR business partner in December 2022 after AgState allegedly fired Angela Harms of Manson from the role. Harms filed a similar lawsuit against the company in January 2024, alleging age and sex discrimination. The lawsuit was dismissed with prejudice in October 2024. It's unclear if she reached a settlement with the agricultural co-op, which denied Harms's allegations in district court last February.

Ramos claims she was forced to step down from her position on July 19, 2024. She later filed an administrative complaint with the Iowa Civil Rights Commission, which issued a right to sue letter. Once a complainant has a letter, the IOCR administratively closes the initial grievance and takes no further action.

While AgState has since acknowledged the commission's letter, the company still denies “the merits of the claims in their entirety,” according to the answer filed by Ploeger.

Troy Upah, AgState CEO, has declined comment on either of the employment discrimination lawsuits.

“AgState does not comment on personnel-related matters or pending legal matters,” Upah told the Storm Lake Times Pilot earlier this month.

Neither Ploeger nor Flynn answered multiple requests for comment on the allegations in either the lawsuit or its response. Ramos couldn't be reached for comment on Tuesday.

AgState denies inequitable treatment of migrant workers

AgState denied all of Ramos's claims of discrimination and unfair treatment against the company's seasonal migrant workers and other minority employees.

For around two years with the company, Ramos claims AgState managers — namely Upah, Elissa Barrick, vice president of human resources and Sarah Meadows, vice president of agronomy — regularly “micromanaged and undermined” her, according to her resignation letter cited in the lawsuit.

“I believe I was being set up to fail,” Ramos wrote to the three supervisors days after she was allegedly forced to resign. “Regarding diversity issues, I consistently highlighted instances where candidates were overlooked due to their sexual orientation or where discriminatory comments were made about hiring women in certain roles.”

Ploeger denied that AgState officials harbored or

acted out of any hostility towards Ramos and other employees of different racial backgrounds.

Ploeger acknowledged Ramos “raised concerns about migrant workers” to Barrick, but she otherwise denied all other related allegations Ramos made of migrant discrimination at AgState, according to the answer filed Monday.

Ramos claimed she repeatedly raised issues to Barrick and other superiors about AgState's mostly Spanish-speaking migrant crew. She claimed AgState “forced” migrants into overcrowded and “far too small” housing for a 2.5-month work period. She alleged the workers resided in a campground with only a communal bathroom and frequent plumbing, heating and water issues.

In her resignation letter sent directly to Barrick last July, Ramos claimed the migrant workers “were talked to for reporting (complaints) to me instead of reporting it to the manager, but they felt the manager was never available for them for housing issues.”

Ramos claimed she repeatedly requested new housing and other solutions for the workers, but supervisors only criticized her for “interfering,” according to the lawsuit filed last month.

Ramos also claimed an unnamed manager used a racial slur when referring to a Mexican worker at a meeting. She claimed Barrick later agreed “there were problems with AgState's treatment of migrant workers and acknowledged they had been treated as second-class citizens,” according to the lawsuit.

The company denied each of Ramos's allegations in its answer to the lawsuit June 23.

Company claims Ramos lacked professionalism

While Ramos claims AgState officials forced her resignation, the company claims she voluntarily resigned due to problems she created for herself.

Flynn argued in the lawsuit that her client felt ostracized and antagonized for a majority of her two years with the company. Ramos claimed she was assigned arbitrary clerical work, excluded from major projects and routinely chastised when attempting to improve her work relationships. In her final email to Upah, Barrick and Meadows last July, Ramos alleged that the “toxic” and “hostile” environment at the company progressively deteriorated her mental state and forced her to question her dedication to a lifelong career in human resources.

“I have been a human resources professional for more than 18 years and I have never experienced a work environment as toxic and filled with retaliation as this one.”

AgState denied Ramos's allegations that her supervisors acted out of bad faith or discrimination. Barrick acknowledged having “many discussions” with Ramos regarding “communication issues with others at AgState, according to the answer to the lawsuit.

“Barrick affirmatively states (Ramos's) communication skills were deficient and she attempted to help improve (Ramos's) job performance on multiple occasions, including through a Performance Improvement Plan, to no avail,” Ploeger wrote in the answer filed Monday.

Ploeger also claimed that at individual meetings between May and July 2024, Barrick and other AgState managers “expressed that (Ramos) struggled to meet expectations,” including project deadlines and prioritizing her responsibilities, according to the answer.

Both Ramos and AgState agree that when Ramos was presented a performance improvement plan, Barrick stated her efforts at work didn't meet AgState's expecta-

tions, according to the lawsuit and its answer. While Ramos claimed managers never thoroughly explained the plan, AgState stated otherwise.

“AgState leaders had performance concerns regarding (Ramos's) work including her responsiveness, communication and ability to perform the work asked of her,” Ploeger claimed of a meeting between Ramos, Barrick and Upah in June 2024.

AgState also claimed at that meeting Ramos “discussed concerns she had regarding time off, flexibility, office space, her relationship with Barrick and deadlines,” according to the answer. The company claimed by that point, Ramos had exhausted her paid time off. Though Ramos claimed she was promised a different office at AgState in Alta, the company denied guaranteeing a relocation.

Ramos escorted out of office

Ramos was escorted out of her office after an allegedly tense final meeting that culminated in her verbal resignation.

AgState confirmed in its answer to Ramos's lawsuit that she was escorted out of the company's Albert City office on July 19, 2024. But the company denied Ramos's allegation that Barrick and Upah “insisted” she be accompanied while exiting the facility for the last time.

AgState claims Ramos consistently underperformed and caused communication issues with managers, according to Ploeger.

Though Ramos claimed her final July meeting with Barrick and Upah was a “surprise disciplinary meeting,” AgState claimed Ramos escalated the discussion.

“(Ramos) argued with Defendant Barrick on every point raised during the meeting,” the company claimed in the answer filed Monday.

AgState claimed managers present at the final meeting “identified some ... deficiencies” outlined in the performance improvement plan crafted for Ramos, according to the answer, the managers claim they continued to ask Ramos whether she was willing to discuss the plan or other options to ameliorate her work performance.

Ramos remembers the meeting differently. Ramos claimed AgState supervisors bullied and retaliated against her for expressing concerns throughout her time with the company, according to the lawsuit.

“It was during this meeting that I realized I could no longer tolerate the false accusations and retaliation anymore and I said that I would leave my employment,” Ramos wrote in her resignation letter. “While I can no longer continue in this job, I am fearful for the employees who remain. Even though I made many complaints, and I am in human resources, nothing changed, and instead, I was retaliated against for complaining.”

Ploeger claimed Ramos failed to exhaust alternate administrative remedies to address the concerns lodged in the lawsuit filed May 12.

Ploeger claimed AgState leaders “did not take any adverse action at any time against (Ramos) because she belonged to any protected group” under the Civil Rights Act, according to the answer. Ploeger claimed that her clients “would have made the same decisions” regarding Ramos's employment “notwithstanding any implicated protection or purported protected activity.”

Ploeger didn't request that a judge dismiss the lawsuit, though she denied the merits of nearly all of Ramos's claims.

A judge has yet to be assigned to the case.

seed and chemical storage warehouses.

The projects at both locations are expected to break ground this summer and will likely be completed by the end of the year.

“These expansions are about more than just added storage — they're about preparing for the future,” AgState's Vice President of Agronomy Sara Meadows said in a statement. “We see strong growth potential in Emmetsburg and Fonda, and these

A-A board mulls uses for excess bond proceeds

NEW ATHLETIC COMPLEX BREAKING GROUND

BY MADELINE COMBS

The Alta-Aurelia Community School District will be tasked with spending a nearly \$3 million surplus of bond proceeds generated from the new Warrior Athletic Complex.

On June 2, the district collected bids from contractors for the new facility, all of which came in far below the expected amount.

The district selected L&L Builders of Sioux City, which offered the lowest bid of just below \$5.1 million for the project.

Preliminary estimates for construction costs of a new athletic complex were around \$7.5 million. The district later bonded for \$8.25 million against their future sales tax dollars in January along with the SAVE (Secure an Advance Vision for Education) funds.

“It's great that we had a low bid of basically \$5.1 million. However, it does put us in a little bit of a situation too, now that we have some additional money,” Superintendent Denny Olhausen said during the board's regular meeting Monday.

Olhausen explained that the \$5.1 million price tag only accounts for the construction of the new facility and the purchase of some additional furniture. Additional pieces of equipment will need to be purchased with other funds.

“So there's still going to be some additional cost to that \$5.1 million, but it's not going to get up to the \$8.25 million that we bonded for,” Olhausen said. “We're going to have some leftover proceeds, which is great, but it's also problem-

atic because we're going to have to be pretty transparent on what we are using that money for.”

Olhausen had previously spoken with Matt Gillespie, managing director of public finance services with Piper Sandler, about similar scenarios — on a much smaller scale.

“I was not thinking that it was going to be this amount of money,” Olhausen added.

The district can use the remaining funds for anything that SAVE dollars would typically be used for such as HVAC maintenance and vehicle purchases.

In an email to Olhausen, Gillespie explained that the district has three options it can pursue:

First, the district could put any of the remaining funds into an escrow account that will mature on Jan. 1, 2031, which at that point, the principal plus any interest accrued could be used to pre-pay the bond principal.

Second, the district could move the surplus to a debt service fund and use the money to make bond payments when they come due between now and March 2028 to comply with the three-year spend-down date required for the funds. Gillespie noted in his correspondence that this was the worst of all presented options.

Third, Gillespie said that the money could be used for other needs across the district — an option that most districts choose.

With this freedom, the district can spend the funds for anything as long as the purchases are legal and do not violate the district's revenue proposed statement as established during the bidding process.

Olhausen expressed that the next step as a board would be to discuss what the most pressing needs are for the district.

“Those things that set up our district for the next 15 to

20 years would be the things I think we'd want to kind of prioritize,” he said Monday.

“I believe we need to be very transparent.”

Athletic complex construction underway

During Monday's meeting, Olhausen also shared that early construction for the athletic complex was slated for this week.

Initial paving around the site and for the new parking lot starts this week with a pre-construction meeting scheduled on Wednesday.

Olhausen said that pavement of the new parking lot and markings were expected to be completed by mid-August.

The physical structure of the new facility will likely be erected the first week of October and is scheduled to be completed around Thanksgiving.

The project will likely conclude by the beginning of May — an earlier completion date than was expected. Initial projections estimated the project to be completed by winter 2026, followed by an earlier estimate of July 2026.

The Warrior Athletic Complex will be located in Alta and sit adjacent to the high school, replacing the current fitness center connected to the old high school building.

Amenities will include large spaces such as a gymnasium, wrestling room and weight room, all which will be reserved for students and staff only.

The board is considering what the future of the old fitness center will be once they move to the new space. During their previous regular session meeting, members discussed the possibility of leasing the current fitness center space from the city and turning it into a fitness center for Alta residents.

A decision on the space is unlikely to come for at least another year.



Left: Cherokee Sheriff Derek Scott supervised the sale of the Holzhauser Ford dealership in Cherokee June 19. Right: Captain Rob Danielson (second from left) oversaw the auction at the Buena Vista County Sheriff's Office Tuesday morning.



Eight people attended the sale last Thursday morning. On the far right is Bill Brookhouser, chief credit officer for Citizens First National Bank of Storm Lake, who offered the only bid. CHRONICLE TIMES photos by ALLISON MOORE

HOLZHAUER: Bank offers no comment

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trumped the bank's bid.

Brandon Tomjack, an Omaha, Neb., attorney representing the Storm Lake bank, declined to comment on the two sales. Bill Brookhouser, chief credit officer for Citizens, also declined to comment on the dealership purchases or what the bank plans to do with them. Brookhouser was present at both sheriff's sales.

Citizens has claimed Holzhauser Ford owed over \$3.2 million after defaulting on a loan securing the acquisition of the companion buildings in Cherokee and Storm Lake around six years ago. An LLC affiliated with Holzhauser purchased the Cherokee building for \$900,000, according to the Cherokee County Assessor's website. The LLC also purchased the Storm Lake dealer-

ship in 2020 for \$2.3 million, according to the Buena Vista County Assessor.

The bank sued and Holzhauser's LLC never responded to its lawsuit. The bank opted to sell both of Holzhauser's Ford dealerships in Cherokee and Storm Lake via sheriff sale. Now the bank can do what it pleases with the former Ford dealerships.

This year, the Storm Lake building was valued at just over \$2 million for property tax purposes. The over 13,000-square-foot building complex includes a showroom, mezzanine, offices and implement services.

The 17,000-square-foot dealership in Cherokee also includes a showroom, implement service and two warehouses. It was valued in 2025 around \$988,000.

Cherokee Sheriff Derek Scott supervised the auction June 19. Scott asked three times if anyone needed to leave the room to make a phone call before placing a

bid. But no one besides Brookhouser submitted a bid.

Captain Rob Danielson oversaw the auction in Buena Vista County on June 24. Storm Lake landlord Angie Snyder and her family attended the sale, but didn't place a bid.

A flurry of lawsuits were filed against the Holzhauser brand last year after Citizens claimed Holzhauser Motors defaulted on a \$6.5 million loan the bank extended nearly two years ago. Citizens already secured a court judgment allowing for the seizure of the dealership's vehicle inventory, which has since been liquidated.

Nearly a dozen creditors have sued the dealership, its shareholders and associated corporate entities, alleging defaults on over \$15 million in loans issued over the last four years. The Storm Lake bank is still seeking to recover the remaining debt it claims it's owed.

crease both efficiency and capacity of the existing facilities, allowing AgState to deliver products and services more effectively during peak agronomy seasons.

projects allow us to better serve our customers while reinforcing our commitment to our members and communities.”

The new additions will in-

AGSTATE: Expanding Emmetsburg, Fonda facilities this year

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The grain elevator was originally purchased from Farmers Coop of Cleghorn in 2010, prior to the merger of ALCECO/Ag Partners and First Cooperative to create AgState in 2021. As of Jan. 1, the facility was valued at over

\$1.7 million.

Cherokee City Councilman Wayne Pingel also noted that the company plans to close the Laurens and Matlock locations in the same time frame.

AgState still operates over 30 facilities across Northwest Iowa.

Around the same time of the announcement of the Cherokee location closure, AgState announced plans to expand its Emmetsburg and Fonda agronomy businesses along with additions of new