

WASHINGTON TOWNSHIP

Highway builder Joseph Sanzari sues North Jersey town after house project goes awry

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He's a construction magnate who orchestrated one of the largest highway projects in New Jersey history, but Joseph Sanzari says he was stymied by Washington Township officials for eight months as he sought to build a single-family home.

Sanzari, in a lawsuit filed Oct. 4 in Superior Court in Bergen County, alleges town officials delayed and failed to provide permits for a home on Fern Street, and showed "obvious disdain" for him during the process, despite his construction bona fides.

Sanzari filed the lawsuit with Lorraine Rubino, the owner of the home. It names Washington Township, its building department, and several borough employees, including Tax Assessor Murty Arisetty, John Scialla and Jason Francese.

Sanzari has been in the highway and heavy construction business for 50 years, and is known for large public works projects like his joint venture with Fletcher Creamer in redesigning the Routes 4 and 17 interchange in Paramus.

But in this case, he was acting as the contractor for Rubino as she sought to build a 2,669-square-foot home on a street near her daughter in February 2020.

Rubino gained all the necessary approvals from the zoning board in October 2020, eight months after Sanzari submitted "what should have been a fairly simple" application to the township, according to the lawsuit.

But Rubino and Sanzari endured "months of irrational and unwarranted demands" from the zoning board, as initial permits were "stalled with no apparent explanation," the lawsuit reads.

Although they had wanted to finish the project by the end of 2020, the "unexplained delay tactics made that impossible," according to the lawsuit. The delays also caused an escalation in costs and a reduction in revenue for sub-contractors.

After hiring an attorney around October 2020, Rubino and Sanzari detailed their concerns about the delays in a correspondence that was sent to the township, in particular the importance of getting issued a "footings and foundation permit" before the weather turned cold.

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While the correspondence did not receive a formal response, a township employee called Sanzari and said the construction company owner was "not appropriately licensed to build new homes," the lawsuit says.

Sanzari is a licensed home improvement contractor and has been a registered and licensed builder in New Jersey for "nearly a half-century," according to the lawsuit.

Sanzari and Rubino were told that all permits would be issued by November 2020, but they did not receive the "vital" footings and foundation permit during this time and also were delayed in receiving a street opening permit.

The lawsuit also claims that Francese, the township's electrical subcode inspector, made "degrading comments" about Sanzari in the presence of other people in March, saying that he believed Sanzari would place an unapproved LED fixture back as soon as Francese left the inspection site. They did not pass the final inspection, necessary for a certificate of occupancy.

Francese also made "highly inappropriate and unprofessional comments about Plaintiff Sanzari and his finances," the lawsuit says.

The home later passed a rescheduled electrical inspection. But John Scialla, the township's chief construction official, "refused and/or neglected to issue a Certificate of Occupancy," according to the lawsuit.

In the meantime, however, Rubino believed since approvals had been granted she was cleared to live in the house and terminated a lease on a property across the street before moving in.

However, she was issued a Notice and Order of Penalty by the town on Aug. 31 for living in the house without a certificate of occupancy. The lawsuit stated she was not sent a previous warning or notice about her application. The penalty imposed a weekly fine of \$2,000.

Sanzari and Rubino want the town to issue the certificate of occupancy, withdraw the penalty, remove an obligation to pay an \$11,798 COAH fee, among other demands.

Neither Sanzari's attorney, Nicholas Sekas, nor Washington Township Attorney Kenneth Poller responded to requests for comment.

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