THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
In The Court of Appeals

Maria E. Walls, in her Capacity as Beaufort County Treasurer, Respondent,

v.

Beaufort County, a Body Politic Subdivision of the State of South Carolina, and John Robinson, in his Capacity as Interim Beaufort County Administrator, Appellants.

Appellate Case No. 2025-000025

Appeal From Beaufort County
Jennifer B. McCoy, Circuit Court Judge

Unpublished Opinion No. 2026-UP-431
Heard June 17, 2026 – Filed September 2, 2026

AFFIRMED IN PART AND REVERSED IN PART

C. Mitchell Brown and Brian Patrick Crotty, both of Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough, LLP, of Columbia, for Appellants.

Michael Enrico Kozlarek and John Marshall Mosser, both of Kozlarek Root Law, LLC, of Greenville, for Respondent.

PER CURIAM: This case concerns the competing authority of the Beaufort County Administrator and the Beaufort County Treasurer over employees of the Treasurer's office. The circuit court heard cross-motions for preliminary injunctions by Appellants Beaufort County (the County) and then-Interim Administrator John Robinson (the Administrator), and Respondent, Treasurer Maria E. Walls (Treasurer), which the court granted in part and denied in part. We affirm in part and reverse in part.

BACKGROUND

Treasurer filed this action on October 5, 2023, against the County and the Administrator. She alleged that starting in April 2023, the County began interfering with her management of Treasurer's office personnel and that the interference continued after Administrator's appointment. In December of the same year, the County passed Resolution 2023/68, revoking and repealing all previously issued personnel handbooks and adopting an updated version of the Beaufort County Personnel Handbook. The updated handbook went into effect on January 1, 2024.

The following March, the County's Deputy Director of Human Resources sent out an email about the County's Employee Classification and Compensation Studies (C&C Studies). The C&C Studies are internal and external reviews of the Employee Classification and Compensation Plan (C&C Plan), which determines how job positions are classified and sets salaries for County employees. The C&C Studies are a tool used to evaluate the C&C Plan and make recommendations to County Council. Data gathered from the C&C Studies is analyzed in comparison to other counties, to local municipalities, and to the overall local job market. Participation in the Study is not mandatory for County employees, but it is encouraged. Despite previous participation by Treasurer's personnel, Treasurer responded to the March email and stated that her office would not be participating. She also requested that her personnel not be contacted further.

In April, the Administrator contacted Treasurer about travel expenses incurred by two of her employees (Employees #1 and #2). The employees are both remote workers who live in California and Florida, respectively. Both employees had traveled to Beaufort for on-site staff training. The employees sought reimbursement for airfare, lodging, car rental, and meal expenses, which Treasurer approved. The Administrator questioned whether the expenses were necessary and proper, bringing to Treasurer's attention the County's policy against reimbursing employees for travel from their homes to their office locations. Treasurer responded that her office's expenses were not "in the purview" of the Administrator. Administrator paid the expenses but warned that the County reserved the right to contest the payments, "including but not limited to requiring reimbursement."

Appellants filed a Motion for Preliminary Injunction (Appellants' Motion) on April 24, 2024, seeking to enjoin Treasurer from (1) preventing her employees' participation in the C&C Studies and (2) approving or authorizing unnecessary travel expenses for Employees #1 and #2.

Treasurer subsequently filed her own Motion for Preliminary Injunction (Treasurer's Motion) seeking to enjoin Appellants from:

> (1) refusing to allow the Treasurer to compensate the employees of the Treasurer's Office in amounts as determined for each employee by the Treasurer and within the budget approved by the [County Council] for the Treasurer's Office; (2) refusing to process, or threatening employees . . . that the County Administration intends to seek recoupment of[] employee expense reimbursement . . . in amounts as determined by the Treasurer and within the budget approved for the Treasurer's Office . . .; (3) refusing to distribute . . . the entire balance of the budget approved by the [Council] for the Treasurer's Office, including but not limited to amounts budget[ed] for personnel; (4) forcing the Treasurer to adopt the Beaufort County Employee Handbook promulgated in February 2024 . . . or to follow any policies or procedures contained in the [handbook] . . . ; and (5) forcing the Treasurer or employees of the Treasurer's Office to participate in any [C&C Study] . . . .

After a hearing on June 25, 2024, the circuit court granted Treasurer's Motion in part and denied it in part. The court also granted Appellants' motion in part and denied it in part. The court enjoined Treasurer from preventing her employees from participating in the C&C Studies and enjoined her from authorizing travel expenses incurred by Employees #1 and #2 unless she shows that the expenses are "necessary to the proper transaction of the legitimate business of the Treasurer's Office." The court enjoined Appellants from threatening Treasurer's employees, from forcing Treasurer to adopt the 2024 Employee Handbook, and from forcing her to participate in the C&C Studies. The court denied Treasurer's request to enjoin Appellants from withholding the entire balance of the budget approved for Treasurer's Office and declined to declare that her employees were not subject to the Employee Handbook.

Appellants filed a Motion to Alter or Amend the Order. They requested that the court correct what they alleged were inconsistencies between different parts of the Order. Appellants also argued that Treasurer failed to establish that the restraining order was necessary to prevent irreparable harm. Lastly, Appellants asked the court to amend the Order to state that Appellants' motion had been granted in its entirety and that Treasurer's had been denied in its entirety. The motion was denied, and this appeal followed.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

Injunctions are drastic remedies intended "to preserve the status quo and prevent possible irreparable injury to a party pending litigation." *Greenville Bistro, LLC v. Greenville County*, 435 S.C. 146, 160, 866 S.E.2d 562, 569 (2021) (quoting *AJG Holdings, LLC v. Dunn*, 382 S.C. 43, 51, 674 S.E.2d 505, 509 (Ct. App. 2009)). The decision to grant or deny a preliminary injunction is within the sound discretion of the trial court and will not be overturned unless the decision is clearly erroneous. *Compton v. S.C. Dep't of Corr.*, 392 S.C. 361, 366-67, 709 S.E.2d 639, 642 (2011).

LAW/ANALYSIS

Appellants argue that the court mischaracterized its decision in the conclusion section of the Order as granting Appellants' Motion in part and denying it in part because the court in actuality granted all the relief Appellants requested. They also contend that the Order erroneously expanded Treasurer's authority. Lastly, Appellants argue that the court erred in granting any part of Treasurer's Motion because Treasurer failed to demonstrate a risk of irreparable harm.

I. Characterization of Outcome

Appellants argue that the court mischaracterized its decision in the conclusion of the Order as granting Appellants' Motion in part and denying it in part because the court in actuality granted all the relief Appellants requested. We disagree. Appellants sought to completely enjoin Treasurer from approving unnecessary travel expenses, using the examples of expenses incurred by Employees #1 and #2.

Treasurer sought to enjoin the County from refusing to reimburse travel expenses. The Order enjoined Treasurer from paying the travel expenses absent a showing that the expenses are necessary to the proper transaction of Treasurer's legitimate business. Thus, the court did not fully embrace either Appellants' or Treasurer's positions; instead, it gave each party only part of what it requested. We therefore find no error in the court's summary of its decision as "granted in part and denied in part." Even if we found fault in the court's summary of its own actions, we are disinclined to reverse simply due to imprecise nomenclature when there is no confusion about what relief is granted. *See In re Duran*, 630 B.R. 797, 815 n.7 (B.A.P. 9th Cir. 2021) ("So long as errors are harmless . . . we may correct them without need to reverse or to remand. . . . [However], we perceive no useful purpose in so acting because nobody is likely to be confused by the defective order.").

II. Treasurer's Authority Over Employees

Appellants contend that the circuit court erred in declaring that the ability to set employee salaries is a management decision implicating Treasurer's authority over firing and hiring her employees. While Appellants parse out specific language in the Order, read in its entirety, we find the court's order affirmed the County's authority over personnel policies, including "salary and classification plans approved by council."[1]

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[1] The Order states,

> The Treasurer's ability to . . . set [employee] salar[ies] or compensation, within the confines of the Treasurer's budget . . . are [] management decisions that establish fundamental working conditions of employees working in the Treasurer's Office. . . . Th[e] [c]ourt is inclined to agree that the setting of certain work conditions implicates the power to hire and fire. Thus, the injunctive relief sought by Plaintiff is appropriate, under these circumstances because irreparable harm would occur as a result. However, with regards to funds that are allocated for a specific purpose, the Treasurer would be prohibited from using those funds for any purpose that is not within the parameters of its designation.

Beaufort County operates under the council-administrator form of government established by the Home Rule Act. S.C. Code Ann. § 4-9-10(b) (2021). A county administrator "serve[s] as the chief administrative officer of the county government." S.C. Code Ann. § 4-9-630(1) (2021). County administrators are "responsible for the administration of county personnel policies including salary and classification plans as approved by the council," as well as the "employment and discharge of personnel." S.C. Code Ann. § 4-9-630(7)-(8) (2021). Further, they are responsible for supervising "the expenditure of appropriated funds." S.C. Code Ann. § 4-9-630(5) (2021).

Treasurer is an elected official who is not subject to the authority of the Administrator "[w]ith the exception of organizational policies established by the [council]." S.C. Code Ann. § 4-9-650 (2021). Her unelected staff *are* county employees subject to personnel system policies and procedures. S.C. Code Ann. § 4-9-30(7) (2021). However, the Administrator does not have the power to hire or fire Treasurer's employees. *Id.* Nor does the Administrator have the authority to suspend those employees. *See Eargle v. Horry County*, 344 S.C. 449, 456, 545 S.E.2d 276, 280 (2001).

The supreme court recognized this tension between county administration and elected officials in *Eargle v. Horry County*. In *Eargle*, a dispute arose between the Horry County Auditor and the Horry County Administrator after three of the auditor's employees were involved in a car accident on their way to the funeral of their coworker's father. *Id.* at 451, 545 S.E.2d at 277-78. The employees were in a county-owned vehicle and were still on the clock at the time of the accident, in violation of County policy. *Id.* at 451, 545 S.E.2d at 278. When the auditor and administrator were unable to agree on how to discipline the employees, the administrator unilaterally chose to suspend them. *Id*.

The auditor brought a declaratory judgment action against Horry County and the administrator seeking to clarify whether the county had the authority to suspend her employees. *Id.* at 451-52, 545 S.E.2d at 278. The circuit court ruled that the administrator did not have the authority to suspend employees of an elected official, and this court affirmed.[2] *Eargle v. Horry County*, 335 S.C. 425, 434, 517 S.E.2d 3, 8 (Ct. App. 1999). This court concluded that "absent express statutory authority, a county administrator or other county governing body has no authority to suspend the employees of an elected official, even if, as here, suspension is

[2] This court affirmed on the issue of authority but reversed and remanded regarding an attorneys' fees issue. *Eargle*, 335 S.C. at 434, 517 S.E.2d at 8.

provided for in the county's personnel policies." *Id.* This court found that a county is authorized to create employee policies and procedures but cautioned against "giv[ing] the county governing body too much control over an elected official and . . . her employees" so as to "force the elected official to place the interests and concerns of the governing body over those of the electorate." *Id.* at 431, 517 S.E.2d at 6. Our supreme court affirmed this court's ruling. *Eargle*, 344 S.C. at 457, 545 S.E.2d at 281.

The circuit court here struck a balance between the competing authority of the two entities consistent with the rationale in *Eargle*. The court found that setting employees' salaries and/or compensation and directing employees to incur expenses in the course of their employment implicates the power to hire and fire. At the same time, the court limited the compensation Treasurer can pay her employees, stating, "The compensation set by law for the employees in the Treasurer's office is the salary approved for their respective positions by the Beaufort County Council as part of its budgeting process." The court further recognized that the County Administrator is responsible for administration of the county's personnel policies, which expressly include "salary and classification plans approved by council." The court also held Treasurer does not have the ability to grant extra compensation to employees from funds that have been specifically allocated for vacant positions in Treasurer's office.

Reading the Order in its entirety, it is clear the court largely adopted the County's position on this issue. Notwithstanding the offending language, the court declined to grant the broad injunction Treasurer sought and instead granted only a very limited injunction against the County, unrelated to salaries. We find no harm to the County and thus no error in the Order.

III. Threat of Irreparable Harm

Appellants contend that the court erred in enjoining them from threatening Treasurer's employees and from forcing Treasurer to adopt the Handbook because Treasurer did not properly establish a threat of irreparable harm. Appellants also argue the court did not sufficiently explain its reasons for enjoining Appellants from threatening employees of Treasurer's Office. We agree.

Injunctions are drastic remedies intended "to preserve the status quo and prevent possible irreparable injury to a party pending litigation." *Greenville Bistro*, 435 S.C. at 160, 866 S.E.2d at 569 (quoting *AJG Holdings*, 382 S.C. at 51, 674 S.E.2d at 509). Applicants "must allege sufficient facts to state a cause of action for injunction and demonstrate that this relief is reasonably necessary to preserve the rights of the parties during the litigation." *Compton*, 392 S.C. at 366, 709 S.E.2d at 642. The applicant must show that "(1) he will suffer immediate, irreparable harm without the injunction; (2) he has a likelihood of success on the merits; and (3) he has no adequate remedy at law." *Id.*

"Whether 'a wrong is irreparable, in the sense that equity may intervene, and whether there is an adequate remedy at law, are questions that are not decided by narrow and artificial rules.'" *Peek v. Spartanburg Reg'l Healthcare Sys.*, 367 S.C. 450, 455, 626 S.E.2d 34, 36 (Ct. App. 2005) (quoting *Kirk v. Clark*, 191 S.C. 205, 211, 4 S.E.2d 13, 16 (1939)). The U.S. Supreme Court has emphasized that movants seeking a preliminary injunction must clearly demonstrate that irreparable harm is *likely* without one; it is not enough to show only a *possibility* of the harm. *Winter v. Nat. Res. Def. Council, Inc.*, 555 U.S. 7, 22 (2008). The Fourth Circuit has said that courts must inquire "whether the plaintiff is indeed suffering actual and imminent harm" and "whether the harm is truly irreparable" or can be later remedied with money damages. *Prysmian Cables & Sys. USA, LLC v. Syzmanski*, 573 F.Supp.3d 1021, 1034 (D.S.C. 2021).

Orders for preliminary injunctions must "set forth the reasons for its issuance[,] . . . be specific in terms[,] . . . [and] describe in reasonable detail . . . the act or acts sought to be restrained . . . ." Rule 65(d), SCRCP. Injunction orders cannot simply state that the grantee would suffer irreparable harm if the injunction does not happen, the order must identify the injury and elaborate on it. *See Spartanburg Buddhist Ctr. of S.C. v. Ork*, 417 S.C. 601, 609, 790 S.E.2d 430, 435 (Ct. App. 2016) (finding error when an order granting injunction did not name the harm threatened).

The threat allegations in this case arise primarily out of the email exchange between Treasurer and the Administrator. After previously questioning Treasurer about the necessity of travel expenses incurred by Employees #1 and #2, the Administrator emailed Treasurer to say that he would pay the expenses under protest. He also stated that "Beaufort County reserves all rights to contest these expenses, including but not limited to requiring reimbursement for any or all expenses." Treasurer's interpretation of this exchange was that the Administrator was warning employees they would be personally liable for reimbursing expenses incurred at the direction of the Treasurer. During the motions hearing, Treasurer's attorney explained that by threatening to seek reimbursement from the employees the Administration would effectively "paralyze" the employees. The court held that "Administration countermanding the Treasurer's terms and conditions of employment would result in an inability to hire and retain employees in the Treasurer's Office and may result in the immediate dismissal or termination of essential employees." The court explained that the harm at risk was Treasurer's inability to retain key employees. The court further explains that directing employees to incur expenses in the course of their employment is a "management decision" that is part of the "fundamental working conditions" and Appellants "seek the authority to oversee the management . . . which [Treasurer] contends would result in the loss of necessary personnel and impair the functions of the Treasurer's Office."

County correctly points out that the emails were sent to the Treasurer, not the employees. In fact, the employees themselves were never contacted by the County. Nor did the County imply it would seek reimbursement from the employees, rather than from Treasurer's budget. County argues that it has both the right and obligation to question expenses that are outside of the County's guidelines and that such an inquiry should in no way be construed as a threat to County employees. We agree and find the emails from County did not constitute a threat of irreparable harm to Treasurer or her ability to retain employees. We therefore reverse that portion of the circuit court's Order enjoining County from "threatening employees of the Treasurer's Office for actions taken by them at the direction of the Treasurer."

CONCLUSION

For the above reasons, the decision of the trial court is

AFFIRMED IN PART AND REVERSED IN PART.

GEATHERS, HEWITT, and CURTIS, JJ., concur.