

THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
In the Court of Appeals

APPEAL FROM RICHLAND COUNTY
Court of Common Pleas
Joseph F. Strickland, Master in Equity Judge

Case No. 2018-00251

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SC Court of Appeals

SOUTH STATE BANK

Respondent,

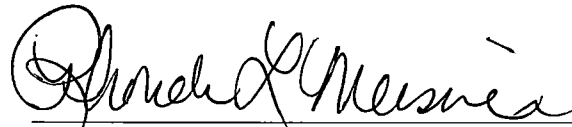
v.

Sand Dollar 31, LLC; Rhonda
Meisner, of whom Rhonda
Meisner is the

Appellant.

INITIAL BRIEF AND DESIGNATION OF MATTER

Oct 5, 2018



Rhonda Meisner
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Appellant

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STATEMENT OF ISSUES ON APPEAL

1. Did the Master in Equity err in determining the deficiency amount owed by appellant Meisner?
2. Whether the respondents are judicially estopped from valuing the property lower than when the parties agreed that “a fair gauge of the value of the property is the amount of the mortgage” as the BANK advanced in its motion to vacate the sale.
3. Did the Master in Equity err by lifting the automatic stay that allowed the BANK to enter the appraisals which were completed in 2012 accompanied by the 2018 letter of opinion?
4. Did the Master in Equity err in denying the appellants motion to amend the counter claims against the BANK?

BACKGROUND

This is the second trip to this Honorable Court of Appeals to review a personal judgment based on a commercial guaranty, the valuation of properties subject to a foreclosure sale, the interpretation of a defensive and offensive declaratory judgment decision, the denial of a motion to amend the counterclaims against the respondent, South State Bank (BANK), and the denial of the motion to alter and amend the judgments.

The first appeal occurred prior to the sale of the properties, prior to a ruling on the declaratory judgment action and prior to the application of the property appraisals to the amount of deficiency. The Motion to Alter and Amend pursuant to S. C. R. Civ. P. Rule 59(e) was filed on June 7, 2012. (R__) Therefore, several questions presented to this Court were not raised and ruled on and therefore not available for appellate review (R__) Now the Master in Equity has ruled on all the outstanding issues making them ripe for appellate review. (R__)

The party subject to the foreclosure, the declaratory judgment action, the guaranty agreement, and the appraisals statutes was Sand Dollar 31, LLC (Sand Dollar). The party subject to the declaratory judgment action, the guaranty agreement, and the appraisal statutes was the appellant, Rhonda Meisner (Meisner).

In the first appeal, the BANK entered judgments into the public roles for both Sand Dollar and Meisner *before* the sale of the properties or before the appraisals were

completed. The appeal sought to review the propriety of the entry of judgments into the public roles against Sand Dollar and Meisner prior to the reduction of the amounts credited to the reduction of the amount owed because the entry affected other properties owned by the appellant.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

On April 25, 2012 a foreclosure hearing was held for the two properties owned by Sand Dollar 31, LLC (Sand Dollar) by the respondent SOUTH STATE BANK (BANK). (R__)

On May 14, 2012 the respondents filed a form 4 with the clerk of Court that named both Sand Dollar and the appellant Rhonda Meisner (Meisner) for judgment amounts which had not been credited with the sale of the properties or reduced by the appraisals. On May 16, 2012 the Court ordered foreclosure and sale of the properties. (R__)

On June 4, 2012 a foreclosure sale occurred where the BANK bid \$25,000 for the Linden Street property and \$10,000 for the Winnsboro Road property. (R__)

On June 7, 2012 the appellant, along with Sand Dollar filed a motion to alter and amend the form 4 filings of judgments that included both the names and the amounts of the BANK'S pre-sale judgments, contrary to the form 4 instructions. (R__)

On July 5, 2012 the court held the deficiency sale and South Carolina Operating Room Equipment, LLC (SCORE) bid \$1.00 more than the BANK'S June bid. (R__)

On July 31, 2012, within 30 days of the deficiency sale, the appellant filed a verified petition for application of the appraisal statute based on S.C. Code Ann. §29-3-680. (R__)

On August 8, 2012 the court entered a

deficiency against Sand Dollar and the appellant that deducted the foreclosure proceeds from the deficiency but did not include the party's valuation opinions. On August 13, 2012 the Court held a status conference and extended the time for the Plaintiff to respond to the petition for appraisal until August 20, 2012. (R__) The BANK filed a motion on September 6, 2012 to vacate the July 5, 2012 deficiency sale. (R__) The BANK submitted to the Court that a fair gauge of the property's value was the amount of the mortgage. (R__) The appellant and Sand Dollar accepted the BANK's value of the properties as the amount of the respective mortgages in writing on November 2, 2012. (R__) South Carolina Operating Room Equipment, LLC entered a notice of appearance of Richard Gleasner as its attorney on October 1, 2012. (R__) On October 18, 2012 the court ordered a hearing scheduled for November 6, 2012. (R__) At the hearing, the court signed an order denying the appellant and Sand Dollar motion to alter and amend that was filed on June 7, 2012. (R__) The first appeal followed.

THIS COURT'S DECISION IN THE FIRST APPEAL

The first appeal in this matter was an appeal of the June 7, 2012 interlocutory order of the denial of the motion to alter and amend the judgments the BANK placed in the public judgment roles for the full amount the BANK requested in the foreclosure against all defendants, prior to the sale of the properties, prior to the hearing on the declaratory judgment, and prior to the application of the appraisals to value the property. As this Court is aware, South Carolina law requires the amount of the debt owed to the BANK,

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deficiency against Sand Dollar and the appellant that deducted the foreclosure proceeds from the deficiency but did not include the party's valuation opinions. On August 13, 2012 the Court held a status conference and extended the time for the Plaintiff to respond to the petition for appraisal until August 20, 2012. (R__) The BANK filed a motion on September 6, 2012 to vacate the July 5, 2012 deficiency sale. (R__) The BANK submitted to the Court that a fair gauge of the property's value was the amount of the mortgage. (R__) The appellant and Sand Dollar accepted the BANK's value of the properties as the amount of the respective mortgages in writing on November 2, 1012. (R__) South Carolina Operating Room Equipment, LLC entered a notice of appearance of Richard Gleasner as its attorney on October 1, 2018. (R__) On October 18, 2012 the court ordered a hearing scheduled for November 6, 2012. (R__) At the hearing, the court signed an order denying the appellant and Sand Dollar motion to alter and amend that was filed on June 7, 2012. (R__) The first appeal followed.

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including attorney's fees, to be determined prior to the foreclosure sale. Had the lower court changed the attorney's fee award the foreclosure would have had to be vacated because the amount owed by Sand Dollar was not determined before the judicial sale. These amounts pursuant to the Supreme Court's instructions on entering the form 4 into the public roles should not have included the names or the unreduced amounts.

This Honorable Court previously ruled the attorney's fees attributed to the judgments could not be determined because the respondents failed to file the affidavit of attorney's fees. (R__) The review of the deficiency judgments, the declaratory judgment, the guaranty agreements and the judicial estoppel arguments are now before this Honorable Court of Appeals.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

A real estate foreclosure is an action in equity. MI Co., Ltd. v. McLean, 325 S.C. 616, 482 S.E.2d 597 (Ct. App. 1997); Dockside Assn v. Detyens, 294 S.C. 86, 362 S.E.2d 874 (1987); Jean Hofer Toal et al., Appellate Practice in South Carolina 194 (1999). In an action in equity referred to a master-in-equity or a special referee for final judgment, this Court may take its own view of the preponderance of the evidence although it is not required to disregard the findings of the master or referee. Lewis v. Premium Inv. Corp., 341 S.C. 539, 535 S.E.2d 139 (Ct. App. 2000) cert. granted.

that the properties should be valued at the amount of the mortgage in its motion to vacate the sale and the BANK did not explain, argue, or enter evidence how appellant Meisner owed the attorney's fees attributed to Sand Dollar. (R__) The BANK argued that "the amount of the mortgage was a fair gauge of the property's value". (R__) Sand Dollar and appellant Meisner agreed in writing and specifically requested the court to value the properties as the amount of the mortgages respectively. (R__) The BANK advanced its proposition of value via the filing of the motion to vacate the sale and the memorandum in support of vacating the sale and oral argument. (R__) Additionally, the BANK never explained or argued or entered evidence how Meisner would be responsible for Sand Dollar's attorneys fees. The BANK also failed to comply with the rule that an affidavit subject to a motion must be provided two days in advance of a hearing to the other side. Here, the BANK did not provide the attorneys fees affidavit prior to the hearing even though it was a motion for attorney's fees based on this Court's remand Order.(R__) Indeed the BANK acknowledged the attorney's fees were not filed until November of 2016 which was well beyond the date of the remand hearing for the attorney's fees. (R__).

A. Courts Order of Appraisal at the 2012 Hearing

The Court ordered the BANK to identify their appraiser and for all parties to proceed with the appraisal process in 2012. (R__) The BANK understood the Order because the

appraisal that was submitted in 2018 after the notice of appeal was filed was completed shortly after this hearing in 2012. (R__)

First, The Court, in its 2017 Order found that the plaintiff timely appointed a certified appraiser pursuant to the appraisal statutes; however, the record of the Court is devoid of that election via a return to the petition for application of appraisal by the defendant which was due in 2012.(R__)

Second, not only did the BANK not submit their election of the appraiser or the completed appraisal to the Court, the BANK failed to file the written opinion or the 2012 appraisal with the Court. (R__) Instead, the BANK filed a motion to set aside or vacate the deficiency sale. (R__)

The appellant however, submitted a verified petition on August 31, 2012 for the election of Angela Buckley via S.C. R. Civ. P. § 29-3-740.; however, the BANK did not file a return or designate their appraiser with the Court. While the BANK may have elected the appraiser outside of the Court filings, the record is clear, the BANK failed to submit a return to the defendant's properly filed appointment of appraiser, Angela Buckley or enter the appraisal into evidence opting instead to vacate the sale and request a "do-over" of the deficiency sale for the benefit of the BANK and contrary to the deficiency sale process. (R__)

The BANK, in 2017 argued in Court for the first time that the appraisal was done pursuant to USPAP guidelines; however, the BANK did not submit the guidelines

for the Court or the defendants to review.¹ He also did not inform the Court that the appraisal opinion expired in 2012 and because it was not entered into evidence cannot be referenced for the valuation properties in 2017 or 2018. A further review of the 2012 USPAP guidelines indicates the previously completed but not submitted appraisals by both appraisers have expired and cannot be used pursuant to the very guidelines they espoused. Additionally, pursuant to the statute, the BANK's appraiser did not comply with the intent of the fair market value of the properties. (R__) See Black's Law Dictionary (Westlaw 9th ed. 2009) (defining "fair market value" as "[t]he prices that a seller is willing to accept, and a buyer is willing to pay on the open market and in an arm's-length transaction")

The valuation opinion of the BANK that "a fair gauge of the value of the property is the amount of the mortgage" was entered into the record and accepted by Sand Dollar and Meisner who requested the court use this valuation for a determination of the value of the properties. (R__)

Second, the BANK put forth in its proposed order that the motion to set aside the sale was never heard and the court adopted this position in its order; however, this simply is not so. (R__) The BANK, by motion on September 6,

¹ The BANK did not offer into evidence or serve on the other parties, the appraisal or report so that the Court could evaluate the report or review the USPAP standards and guidelines as argued by the BANK. Importantly, the BANK argued the report would have been served on Glenn Bowens, the attorney representing the parties at the time. However, Mr. Bowens could not remember whether he received the report or not, but the record is clear that the report or appraisal was not served on the Court or entered into evidence after trial, before the motion to vacate the sale, at the final hearing or at any time after the hearing. Indeed, the BANK filed a motion to lift the automatic stay to get the 2012 appraisals into evidence.

2012, requested a hearing on their motion to set aside the sale. (R__) The motion was filed with the clerk of court(R__) The BANK paid the motion fee and submitted a memorandum in support of their motion which was entered into the record of the Court. (R__)

Because of the motion, South Carolina Operating Room Equipment, LLC, the legal purchaser of the properties, retained Richard Gleissner to represent its interests in the motion to vacate the sale. Mr. Gleissner filed a notice of appearance on October 1, 2012. The Court then set Nov 6, 2012 as the date by which the Court would hear the motion. Teri Stomski, on behalf of the BANK and a former member of Rogers, Townsend and Thomas, PC (the same firm as current counsel) argued the motion with several officers of the Court in attendance. (R__) The officers of the Court in attendance were Teri Stomski, Glenn Bowens, Rick Gleissner and the Honorable Joseph Strickland. (R__) The plaintiff avers that while the motion was not ruled on, the motion was heard by the Court and the opinion of value accepted by the defendants in writing prior to the November 6, 2012 hearing and therefore is subject to judicial estoppel. (R__)

The appraisal statute provides a mechanism when a financial institution demands a deficiency by which a defendant in a foreclosure action or a guarantor and can apply for the property to be appraised. (R__) The statute requires that the applicant file a motion for order of appraisal within 30 days after the deficiency

sale. Here it is undisputed that an application for order of appraisal was timely filed by appellant Meisner. (R__)

The purpose of the appraisal statute is to protect mortgagors and guarantors from a financial institution from selling the property at a sacrifice at the foreclosure sale only to then demand the difference in the amount owed by the defendants.

(R__) In essence the appraisal statute offers relief for defendants, like appellant Meisner when a deficiency is demanded if the property is not sold for an amount that covers the deficiency by allowing an appraisal process. (R__) This fail safe or appraisal process is not required *when the parties agree to the valuation of the properties* such as in this case because there is agreement between the parties. This Honorable Court has always accepted the notion that the owner of the property is in a good position to determine the value of the property. Likewise, the BANK that loaned money on the property is also in a good position to value the property.

The appraisal statute also requires that the appraisal submitted are the market value of the properties and not a demised amount. (R__)

This case began in 2011 with the foreclosure of two rental properties against Sand Dollar 31, LLC. The BANK demanded a deficiency from both Sand Dollar and appellant Meisner. As part of the counter claim to the foreclosure suit, the appellant requested a declaratory judgement regarding the rights of the party's

subject to a mortgage, guaranty agreement, preservation of appraisal rights about the demanded deficiency of both Sand Dollar and appellant Meisner. (R__)

Importantly, all parties agreed, the final deficiency amount against each party, Sand Dollar and appellant Meisner, would be determined after the deficiency sale of the properties when the sales price could be applied to reduce the deficiency if any. (R__). The determination of the deficiency of each of the parties requires the interpretation of a guaranty agreement and application of the sales price along with the appraised value to the reduction of the amounts owed. (R__) The Court entered judgments into the public roles in 2012 against both Sand Dollar and appellant Meisner for the full amount of the foreclosure figures. (R__) All parties agreed these amounts would be reduced by the sale of the properties and the application of the appraisal amounts. (R__) The Court entered final deficiency judgments for both Sand Dollar and the appellant in 2017. (R__)

Evidence of liability of Meisner for Sand Dollar's debts during the trial.

The BANK attached two guaranty agreements signed by Meisner to the amended complaint and entered the two agreement into evidence in 2012 during the trial. (R__) In the answer and counter claim of appellant Meisner, she denied liability under the guaranty agreement and requested the Court interpret the

guaranty agreements *to establish the deficiency* against her if any. (R__) The deficiency was decided in 2017; however, the BANK failed to offer evidence during the foreclosure hearing or thereafter how appellant Meisner owed the amounts identical to Sand Dollar. (R__) The BANK failed to provide evidence or testimony from appellant Meisner or its own witness at trial that appellant Meisner signed the guarantees in her individual capacity instead of on behalf of Sand Dollar. In fact, the BANK's witness testified Meisner signed the guaranty on behalf of Sand Dollar. (R__) Meisner's signature also appears on the mortgage; however, there is no dispute that Meisner does not owe money under the mortgage Sand Dollar. (R__)

The plaintiff BANK limited the testimony during the trial to the amount of the debt owed by Sand Dollar and did not prosecute the claims against appellant Meisner for her personal liability either during the trial or in post-trial deficiency proceedings.

“there are certain matters that the plaintiff and the defendant agree are not in controversy *at this point* and the only thing we'll be taking testimony on is the amount of the debt and the foreclosure itself, and I believe those are the only matters that are outstanding.” (R__) (emphasis added by appellant).

Because appellant Meisner requested a declaratory judgment in the answer and counterclaim to determine her deficiency, if any, based on an interpretation of

the guaranty agreements in evidence, a review of the guaranty agreements is in order. (R__) The deficiency for both Sand Dollar and appellant Meisner was determined in 2017 and not prior to or during the initial appeal because the motion to alter and amend the judgments was filed prior to the assessments of any deficiencies. (R__) As such, the appellant argues the guaranty agreement, the appraisals, and the declaratory judgment action are appropriate for appellate review.

The BANK agreed that both parties were entitled to their respective appraisal rights in 2012. (R__). Glenn Bowens in open court told the court the appraiser hired by Sand Dollar and Meisner was Angela Buckley. (R__) In 2018, the BANK objected to the fact that Meisner filed the application for appraisal; however, Glenn Bowens the attorney for Sand Dollar also requested the Court adopt the valuation of the properties for Sand Dollar. (R__). The Court, during a 2012 hearing agreed with Sand Dollar and Meisner that the final determinations of each party's liability would be held after the deficiency sale and the application of the appraisals. (R__) However, the BANK never entered the appraisals in 2012, instead they filed a motion to vacate the sale and argued a fair value of the properties was the amount of the mortgage which all parties adopted. (R__)

A. The BANK's testimony at trial on April 25, 2012.

Wendy Wolfson Vice President of BANK testified to the debt owed by Sand Dollar and to the fact the BANK paid attorney's fees. (R__) This

testimony was necessary to prove the Sand Dollar debt prior to the foreclosure proceedings against Sand Dollar. (R__) However, Ms. Wolfson did not testify how appellant Meisner, in her individual or personal capacity owed the identical debts to the Bank (R__). Wolfson if fact testified that Meisner signed the guaranty agreement *on behalf* of Sand Dollar but did not testify as to Meisner's capacity when she signed the agreements. (R__). Meisner's only testimony was that she was the member of Sand Dollar 31 LLC. (R__) In the answer to the complaint, Meisner does not admit personal liability but instead asks the Court to interpret the guaranty agreement and mortgage documents via a declaratory judgment action to determine the deficiency, as to the rights and responsibilities of the parties. (R__). The BANK did not submit any evidence before trial or during trial that Meisner acted in her personal capacity. The agreement is silent as to the capacity of appellant Meisner. (R__)

B. The Guaranty agreement does not indicate Meisner's legal status.

Prior to and during the trial, held on April 25, 2012, the BANK presented two Guaranty Agreements executed by Meisner that guaranteed payment of the two promissory notes between the BANK and Sand Dollar.(R__) The guaranty agreements are limited to a maximum liability for a deficiency judgment to \$31,140.00 for the loan in 11-CP-40-6317(R__) and \$36,000.00 for the loan in 11-CP-40-6318.(R__) A review of the guaranty agreements in question offers no

evidence of whether Meisner was acting in her personal capacity or as a member of Sand dollar (R__) There are no words such as "Personal Guaranty" or "Jointly and Severally" or "individually and "corporately" or "acting as a member on behalf of Sand Dollar."

In fact, without acknowledgement from Meisner, a reader of the guaranty could not determine if Meisner was signing in her capacity as the single member of Sand Dollar or as an individual. The BANK's witness, Wendy Wolfson never testified to the capacity of appellant Meisner. (R__) It is at all times the responsibility of the plaintiff to prove its case against all defendants. Additionally the "articles of instruction" for members or "articles of organization" required as part of the loan for Sand Dollar were not attached or entered into evidence to prove that Meisner had the authority to act or enter into agreements as a Member of Sand Dollar. (R__)

Since none of the LLC documents are attached to the loan, it is not unreasonable to read the Guaranty agreement as an authority to serve the function of providing a "right to act" agreement on behalf of the LLC by Meisner as part of the loan processing. (R__) As such, an independent reader would not recognize without additional information whether the guarantees were executed in Meisner's personal capacity or in the capacity of "member" Sand Dollar 31, LLC. It is always the plaintiff's responsibility to prove its case.

C. Declaratory Judgment answer of appellant and Sand Dollar.

In the Appellant's answer, there was no indication or admission as to the personal capacity by which the appellant signed the guaranty agreement. (R. __) The BANK entered two guaranty agreements that were attached to the amended complaint by the BANK. (R. __) It is undisputed the guaranty agreement was drafted by the BANK. (R. __) The appellant specifically requested the Court interpret the rights and responsibilities of the parties in the Counter claim regarding the two guaranty agreements *in establishing the deficiency*. (R. __). The Court did not establish the deficiency in 2012, it established the deficiency in 2017. (R. __) The Court did not rule on the declaratory judgment action or the capacity of appellant Meisner prior to the previous appeal (R. __).

All plaintiffs in any legal proceeding must prove their case against each defendant. Here, the original appeal asked this Court to review the *propriety* of the BANK entering judgment amounts prior to the application foreclosure sale proceeds and the appraisal of the properties and contrary to the Supreme Court's instructions in filling out the form 4 in deficiency cases because the judgments, as filed, affected other properties owned by the appellant.

The S. C. R. Civ. P. Rule 59 (e) that was appealed was filed on June 7, 2012 which was before the deficiency sale date, the appraisal, the guaranty arguments, or the final deficiency which occurred in 2017. (R__)

The Master in Equity, in the 2012 motion to amend hearing, agreed that the declaratory judgment action, the guaranty arguments, the appraisals, and the final deficiency would be decided after the appraisals and the deficiency sale of the properties. (R__). The Court also requested the parties brief the guaranty agreements at the motion to alter and amend hearing; however, like the deficiency for the parties, the court did not rule on the guaranty agreement in 2012. (R__) Therefore the Court's decision on the guaranty agreement was not included in the previous appeal because the final deficiency judgments were not determined, and the declaratory judgment applied to the deficiency. Appellant Meisner was not implicated in the foreclosure as a defendant only Sand Dollar.

In 2012 the judgments that were appealed were the judgments of foreclosure that were entered by the BANK against Sand Dollar and appellant Meisner. The parties agreed the amount of the judgments would change once the sales were completed, the appraisals were completed, and the instruments interpreted. (R__) The Master in Equity, in its Order stated the issue of the guaranty agreement was already resolved; however, at the motion to alter and amend hearing in 2012 prior to the determination of the deficiency, he asked for the party's to brief the issue

and the final determination of liability of the parties would be determined after the deficiency sale and application of the appraisals which occurred long after the motion to amend hearing. (R__).

Here, the BANK, during the trial on April 13, 2012, or in pre-trial submissions of evidence, presented no evidence that appellant Meisner guaranteed the debts of Sand Dollar, personally or separately from Sand Dollar. In fact, the BANK's own witness Wendy Wolfson testified appellant Meisner signed the guaranty agreement on behalf of Sand Dollar. (R__)

Appellant Meisner argues that the purpose of the Guaranty Agreements and the intent of the parties was to guarantee the Plaintiff received \$31,140.00 for the loan in 11-CP-40-6317 and \$36,000.00 for the loan in 11-CP-40-6318 should Sand Dollar default. These amounts represent the money loaned by the BANK to Sand Dollar that were presented during the trial. Appellant Meisner also claims that if the high bid at the foreclosure sale *or the appraised value was equal to or exceeded* those amounts, then liability under the Guaranty Agreements will be satisfied as the Plaintiff will have received the guaranteed amounts provided in those agreements. (R__).

Limitation of the Guaranty agreements

Meisner bases her claim that the Guaranty Agreements limits liability to \$36,000.00 and \$31,140.00 on three basic grounds.

First, the Guaranty Agreements *specifically states* the maximum dollar amount in paragraph A.

Second, paragraph 4 provides that the guarantor is liable for "all indebtedness, without limitation as to amount" *if* "no amount is stated." However, since the guaranty agreements entered into evidence specifically stated the amounts of \$31,140.00 and \$36,000.00, then the guaranty is limited to those amounts. (R__)

Third, this was the understanding of the parties at the time the Guaranty Agreements were made, based on representations made by the Bank to the effect that the amount guaranteed was the dollar amount stated in the agreement.

The BANK's interpretation of paragraph 4 of the guaranty 4 conflicts with paragraph A. (R__) The Bank's interpretation of Paragraph 4 reveals an inherent ambiguity between paragraph 4 and paragraph A.

Guaranty agreements are contracts and their interpretation are governed by the same contract law principles as any other contract. The South Carolina Court of Appeals has held:

A contract is ambiguous when the terms of the contract are reasonably susceptible to more than one interpretation.

The uncertainty in interpretation can arise from the words of the instrument, *or in the application of the words* to the object they describe. (emphasis by appellant).

Whether a contract is ambiguous must be determined from the entire contract and not from any isolated clause of the agreement. Pee Dee Stores, Inc. v. Doyle, 381 S.C. 234, 672 S.E.2d 799 (Ct.App.2009) (internal citations omitted)

When a contract is susceptible of more than one interpretation, the non-drafting party is given the benefit of the ambiguity. Transouth Financial Corp. v. Cockran 324 S.C. 290, 478 S.E.2d 63 (Ct. App. 1996).

The South Carolina Supreme Court has held:

It is generally held that an ambiguity in a written contract should be construed most strongly against the drafters. We quote, with approval, the following from 17A C.J.S. Contracts § 324:

"(A)mbiguous language in a contract should be construed liberally and most strongly in favor of the party who did not write or prepare the contract and is not responsible for the ambiguity; and any ambiguity in a contract, doubt, or uncertainty as to its meaning should

be resolved against the party who prepared the contract or is responsible for the verbiage. The reason for the rule of strict construction against the party preparing the contract is that one who speaks or writes can, by exactness of expression, more easily prevent mistakes in meaning more than one with whom he is dealing, and that he who has brought the agreement into existence and is thus primarily responsible for its inadequacy should justly suffer for its shortcomings." Myrtle Beach Lumber Company, Inc. v. Willoughby, 276 S.C. 3, 274 S.E.2d 423 (S.C. 1981).

There is no dispute that the Guaranty Agreements were drafted and prepared by the Bank. Based on the Supreme Court's holding, the ambiguity must be resolved in favor of Meisner. The parties' conflicting interpretations requires the Court to interpret the agreement and issue a declaratory judgment. When a written contract is ambiguous extrinsic evidence may be admitted to determine the parties' intent. Duncan v. Little, 384 S.C. 420, 682, S.E.2d 788 (2009). Here, the only testimony from the BANK of the party's capacity was from Wendy Wolfson, the BANK's witness when she testified appellant Meisner signed "on behalf" of Sand Dollar. (R__)

The Guaranty Agreements in the two cases are pre-printed forms and are identical except for the dates and dollar amounts. Both Guaranty

Agreements contain two options, Paragraph A and B, with a box beside each paragraph, one of which is to be marked with an "X". Paragraph A was marked in both 11-CP-40-6317 and 11-CP-40-6318. Importantly, Paragraph A limited the amount guaranteed to \$31,140.00 (11-CP-40-6317) and \$36,000.00 (11-CP-40-6318) respectively. On the other hand, Paragraph B, which was *not checked*, required payment by the guarantor of:

...each and every debt, liability and obligation *of every type and description* which Borrower may now or at any time hereafter owe to lender (*whether such debt, liability or obligation now exists or is hereafter created or incurred*, and whether it is or may be direct or indirect, due or to become due, *absolute or contingent*, primary or secondary, liquidated or unliquidated, or joint, several or joint and several; all such debts, liabilities and obligations being hereinafter collective referred to as the "indebtedness"). (emphasis added) The Bank claimed, and the Court ruled that Meisner is liable for payment of Sand Dollar's debts beyond the \$31,140.00 and \$36,000.00 stated in the guaranty which are exactly the type of debts contemplated by Paragraph B; at the time the Guaranty Agreement was executed these other debts:

- (1) did not exist;

- (2) they were neither created nor incurred;
- (3) were indirect and secondary to the amount borrowed;
- (4) were contingent and had not yet become due.

The Bank wants to focus just on paragraph 4 which itself is ambiguous; however, when interpreting a contract, the contract must be read, without focusing on any single provision to determine the contract's meaning. Pee Dee Stores, at 242. Paragraph 4 must be interpreted considering paragraphs A and B. The Bank's argument that paragraph 4 makes Meisner liable for these additional debts would make more sense if Paragraph B had been checked; however, the parties did not check Paragraph B. Even under the Bank's interpretation that the specific dollar amount stated in the Guaranty Agreement referred to the amount of "principal" guaranteed, the Plaintiff still claims \$48,698.20 is due in principal in 11-CP-40-6317(Appellate Case 213558), when the Guaranty Agreement only provided for \$31,140.00, which is over \$17,000.00 more in principal than the Bank is allowed under its own interpretation of the agreement.

The question before the Court is whether the Guaranty Agreements place a monetary limitation on liability (as claimed by appellant Meisner) or whether

liability is unlimited (as claimed by the Bank). The South Carolina Court of Appeals has held:

Although not yet decided in South Carolina, in the absence of an express limitation of an amount of a guaranty as a general rule the amount of the liability, or, in other words, the measure of damages, on a default by the principal obligor is that amount of loss which the guarantee has sustained by reason of such default PPG Industries, Inc. v. Orangeburg Paint Center, Inc., 297 S.C. 176, 375 S.E.2d 331 (Ct. App. 1988)

The Guaranty Agreements in these cases do place "an express limitation of an amount" e.g. \$36,000.00 and \$31,140.00. If the parties intended for her liability to extend beyond the stated dollar amounts, then paragraph B would have been marked. Based on the holding in PPG Industries, and Myrtle Beach Lumber Company, the ambiguity created by paragraph 4 and paragraph A must be resolved in Meisner's favor. Additionally, the Bank has valued the property at the mortgage amount of the property which effectively satisfies the guaranty agreement.

- II. Whether the respondents are judicially estopped from valuing the property lower than when all parties agreed that the property should be valued at the amount of the mortgage.**

In the initial appeal, this Honorable Court ruled:

“ As to whether the Bank is estopped from valuing the properties less than the amount stated in its motion to vacate: Cowburn v. Leventis, 366 S.C. 20, 41, 619 S.E.2d 437, 449 (Ct. App. 2005) ("In order for an issue to be preserved for appellate review, . . . it must be raised and ruled upon by the trial [court].")

At the time of the initial interlocutory appeal, the S.C.R. Civ. P. Rule 59 (e) motion was filed *before* the deficiency sale, the appraisal, and the BANK's admitted valuation in its motion to vacate the sale.

As such, the judicial estoppel argument had not been presented to the lower court for a ruling when the first Rule 59 (e) was filed that was the subject of the initial appeal. Now, however, the Court ruled on judicial estoppel argument on July 27, 2017:

“ Because the plaintiff withdrew its motion to vacate the judicial sale before it was heard, the Court rejects Meisner's argument the plaintiff should be judicially estopped from taking a position that differs from its position in that motion.”

First, the Court's Order conflicts with the facts of this case. The BANK made a motion to vacate the sale, filed the motion with the clerk of court, paid the motion fee, and submitted a memorandum in support of the motion. (R__)

The court ordered a hearing on the BANK's motion to vacate the sale in September of 2012, which was held on November 6, 2012. (R__) The Court absolutely heard the judicial estoppel argument during the November 6, 2017 hearing and received the BANK's written memorandum in support of the motion to consider. (R__) The parties appeared on November 6 2017 and the BANK advanced its argument that the sale should be vacated for the reasons submitted in its memorandum in support of its motion to vacate the sale. (R__) There was not a court reporter present due to the presidential election. (R__) Whether the hearing was memorialized by a court reporter or not, this fact does not change the fact the court heard the arguments advanced by the BANK. Now the Court has ruled against judicial estoppel for the BANK's valuation of the properties based on the fact the court did not hear the motion, which is clearly erroneous. The court heard the arguments and it was not until 2014 that the BANK withdrew the motion to vacate the sale.(R__) The withdrawal of the motion does not withdraw the argument. (R__)

The Court's Order seems to suggest if there is not a court reporter present then the hearing did not occur at all even though the Master in Equity was present at the hearing. (R__)

The BANK came to a Court of Equity with conflicting positions. (R__)

First, the BANK filed a foreclosure proceeding against Sand Dollar and requested the Court to declare that the Sand Dollar defendant owed the BANK an amount of money in excess of the money loaned. (R__) The Bank presumably had an appraisal done prior to loaning money that the BANK relied on to loan the money to Sand Dollar in 2008. (R__) The BANK inadvertently admitted in 2017 the properties were entitled to a greater loan than the loan was given based on the BANK's appraisals. (R__) This gives insight to the value of the property from the BANK's perspective. (R__)

Importantly, because these were commercial loans, the amount loaned was only 70 percent of the value of the property. (R__) This means at the time of the loan the BANK determine the property to be valued 30 percent more than the money loaned.

Then the BANK sent a representative to bid on the property at the June 4, 2012 sale for a price the BANK conceded provided equity to the buyer. (R__).

According to the deficiency statute, the BANK is required to place its highest and best bid at this sale and is prohibited from bidding at the deficiency sale. (R__)

Then the BANK hired an appraiser that was prohibited under the appraisal statute because he routinely does work for the BANK on the commercial side of

the business. (R__) This disqualified appraiser entered an opinion of the value of the property less than one of the properties previously sold for at a previous foreclosure sale. (R__) He also used as comparables foreclosure properties. (R__) The BANK admitted the appraiser worked on the commercial side of the business but offered that it was impossible for them to find an appraiser that did not have ties to the BANK. (R__) The BANK in it filed a motion to vacate the sale argued that the purchaser South Carolina Operating Room Equipment, LLC (SCORE) gained equity via the purchase and because appellant Meisner is the single member of the LLC, the sale should be vacated. (R__).

There is no prohibition that the BANK or the mortgagor can purchase the property at the deficiency sale, so there certainly is no prohibition for a third party like SCORE to purchase the property. (R__) In fact had the BANK bid the property's actual value or the value the BANK asserted during the Motion to Vacate the sale, SCORE would not have been able to purchase the property. It was because the BANK bid so little that SCORE could receive a loan and purchase the property.

Additionally, the BANK is required to offer its highest and best bid at the sale and is prohibited from rebidding at the deficiency sale (R__). SCORE's bid was more than the BANK's bid at the deficiency sale, so the BANK was not prejudiced by the bid (R__).

The Court orally ordered the BANK to designate their appraiser and ordered both parties to complete the appraisal process in 2012. (R__) The fact the BANK's appraisal was complete in 2012 indicates the BANK perceived this to be the Order of Appraisal it was looking for in 2012. (R__)

However, instead of submitting the appraisal, the BANK filed a motion to set aside the sale and submitted to the court that the basis of the filed Motion to Vacate the Foreclosure Sale, was the fact that Meisner was the single member of SCORE, LLC and that Meisner had filed a Certified Petition as outlined in the Appraisal Statute for the valuation of the properties. The Bank named both Meisner and Sand Dollar as Defendants in the Motion to Vacate the Judicial Sale but did not name SCORE, LLC as a defendant in the Motion to Vacate the Judicial Sale. The Court scheduled a status conference for November 6, 2012 to hear the Motion to Vacate and to hear arguments on the memorandums regarding the Motion to Vacate the Sale which were previously submitted to the Court regarding' the valuation of the properties. At the hearing, Judge Strickland apologized that due to the Presidential election there would not be a court reporter available to make a record. The parties agreed to proceed with the judicial estoppel arguments and the BANK's motion to vacate the sale with the caveat that if necessary another hearing would be held to create a record. After an update on the

submitted memorandums, the order to deny the Motion to Alter and Amend the judgment that was filed in May of 2012 was ruled on by the Court at the November 6, 2012 hearing; however, the motion only included those facts and arguments presented prior to the filed motion in May of 2012.

III. Did the Master in Equity err in lifting the automatic stay so that the BANK could enter its evidence after the notice of appeal was filed.

The only evidence of the value of the property was the agreement by all the parties, at the suggestion by the BANK, “that a fair gauge of the property’s value was the amount of the mortgage.” (R__) The BANK elected not to submit its 2012 appraisal and instead sought to vacate the deficiency sale.

The BANK failed to enter the letter of opinion as to valuation of the properties of the BANK’s appraiser in 2018. The BANK also failed to enter the BANK’s appraisals into evidence in 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, or 2017 which were completed in 2012. It is unclear if the BANK did not file the appraisals due to the objections of the appraiser in 2012 as being disqualified under the statute or the pursuit of the motion to vacate the sale, either way the BANK advanced the mortgage amount valuation. (R__) In 2012 the BANK filed a motion to vacate the deficiency sale and argued a fair value of the properties is found in the amount of the mortgage. (R__) Sand Dollar and appellant Meisner agreed with the BANK’s

valuation of the properties as the amount of the mortgage and requested the court enter the mortgage amount pursuant to the appraisal statutes as the agreed upon value. (R__) Sand Dollar and Meisner accepted the valuation

In 2018, The BANK filed a motion to lift the automatic stay once it realized it failed to enter the letter and the appraisals into evidence that the Court could consider determining the value of the property. While the BANK categorized the submission of the appraisals and the opinion letter of Eugene Garvin to the Court as ministerial in nature, the appellant avers the failure is substantive in nature because the 2018 letter referenced the 2012 appraisals which were not entered into evidence until 2018. The only valuation of the properties before the Court is when the BANK valued the property in its motion to vacate the sale as the amount of the mortgage which Sand Dollar and Meisner accepted. (R__). Because the Court used the appraisals from 2012 and the letter from 2018 to base its final deficiency against appellant Meisner, the submissions were substantive. The appellant and the BANK had previously agreed to the BANK's valuation in its motion to vacate the sale which the attorney for Sand Dollar and for the appellant previously accepted in writing at the trial level.

The notice of appeal was filed in February of 2018. The only evidence of the value of the properties that fits within the statutory confines of the appraisal statute

is the agreed upon value of the amount of the mortgages for the two properties by the BANK and the appellant.

Mr. Garvin was objected to as not falling with the statutory guidelines in 2012 and cannot be accepted now. Additionally, his 2012 report was never entered into evidence and the appellant argues, it cannot be entered now.

IV. Did the Master in Equity err in denying the appellants motion to amend the counter claims against the BANK?

The Master in Equity erred in denying the appellant's motion to amend the counterclaims in this case.

S.C. Rules of Civ. P. Rule 15. Rule 15 specifically allows amendment to the pleadings, even after entry of judgment. The tort of abuse of process provides a legal remedy for one damaged by another's perversion of the legal processes which are not intended by the procedure. Huggins v. Winn-Dixie Greenville, Inc. 249 S.C. 206, 210, 153 S.E. 2d 693, 695 (1967) ("[A]n abuse of process is the employment of legal process for some purpose other than that which it was intended by the law to effect -- the improper use of a regularly issued process."); W. Page Keeton et al., Prosser and Keeton on the Law of Torts § 121 at 897 (5th ed. 1984) ("[T]he gist of the tort is . . . misusing, or misapplying process justified in itself for an end other than that which it was designed to accomplish."). The purpose does not have to be illegitimate to complete the tort of abuse of process.

The abuse occurs when the process is used in a manner it was not intended. See Fowler W. Harper et al., The Law of Torts § 4.9 (3d ed. 1996).

Here, the BANK employed an appraiser that the BANK knew was disqualified per the statute as the BANK asked the court to ensure the appellants appraiser had not worked for the appellant previously. (R__) Nevertheless, the BANK hired an appraiser that routinely worked for the BANK on the commercial side of the business. (R__) The BANK argued the BANK could not find an appraiser so removed because the BANK is a regional BANK. (R__) Had the appellant not discovered his relationship with the BANK during a conversation, she would not have had reason to request his disqualification. It is the intentional act of hiring someone to complete an appraisal known to be disqualified that abuses the appraisal process.

Second, the BANK knew it was allowed by law for the BANK or the mortgagor to purchase the property at the deficiency sale as well as any third party because it was written in the Order of foreclosure. (R__) Nevertheless, the BANK filed the motion to vacate the sale which required appellant Meisner as a member of SCORE to hire an attorney to represent the interests of SCORE. (R__) The BANK's actions caused appellant Meisner and SCORE to spend additional money on attorney's fees and costs. The BANK did not have a good faith basis to file the motion to vacate and did not have a good faith basis to hire an appraiser that

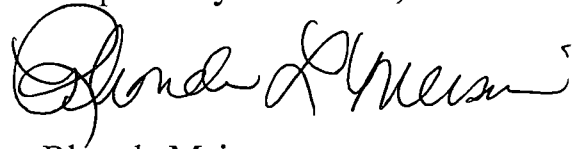
routinely works for the BANK in violation of the appraisal statute. The BANK's actions have abused the process of the appraisal statute and abused the process of the deficiency statute and should not be allowed to pervert these protective statutes with impunity. The BANK's actions have caused appellant Meisner to spend additional time, effort, and money in the form of additional attorney's fees, parking costs, copying and motion costs. The Master in Equity should have allowed amendment to the cross claims by appellant Meisner.

CONCLUSION

For the above reasons and references to the record. The appellant respectfully requests this Honorable Court to reverse and remand this case to the Master in Equity to enter an Order that requires the BANK to abide by the agreement of the parties in 2012 and enter an Order that the properties are to be valued at \$62,280 and \$36,000 as the BANK valued the properties in its 2012 motion to vacate the sale. Additionally, because the BANK did not comply with the rules for presenting affidavits two days prior to hearings on the matter, the appellant requests the attorney's fees attributed to her be reduced from her amounts owed, if any. Finally, the appellant respectfully requests to be able to amend the counterclaims against the BANK as a sanction for abusing the appraisal statutes and the deficiency sales process.

October 5, 2018

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rhonda Meisner". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed contact information.

Rhonda Meisner
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THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
In the Court of Appeals

APPEAL FROM RICHLAND COUNTY
Court of Common Pleas
Joseph F. Strickland, Master in Equity Judge

Case No. 2018-00251

SOUTH STATE BANK

Respondent,

v.

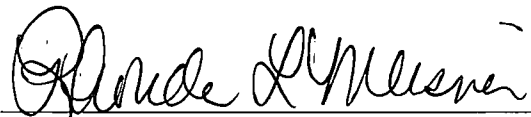
Appellant.

Sand Dollar 31, LLC; Rhonda
Meisner, of whom Rhonda
Meisner is the

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OCT 05 2018
SC Court of Appeals

Certificate of Service: The appellant certifies she has served a copy of her INITIAL BRIEF AND DESIGNATION OF MATTER on all parties by placing a copy of the INITIAL BRIEF AND DESIGNATION OF MATTER and this certificate of service to : Sean Foerster Rogers, Townsend and Thomas, PC 1221 Main Street 14th floor Columbia, SC 29201; Glenn Bowens po Box 424 Winnsboro, SC 29180

October 5, 2018



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Appellant