

FILED
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Clerk of Circuit Court
Eau Claire County, WI
2019CV000192

STATE OF WISCONSIN

CIRCUIT COURT
Branch II

EAU CLAIRE COUNTY

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VOTERS WITH FACTS,
J. PETER BARTL,
DAWN BERGSTROM
CYNTHIA BURTON,
MARYJO COHEN, JO ANN HOEPPNER CRUZ,
LEAH KUBETZ, RACHEL MANTIK,
JANEWAY RILEY, CHRISTINE WEBSTER,
DOROTHY WESTERMANN, JANICE
WNUKOWSKI,

Case No. 19CV192
Case Code: 30955

Plaintiffs,

vs.

CITY OF EAU CLAIRE and
CITY OF EAU CLAIRE JOINT REVIEW BOARD

Defendants.

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DEFENDANT’S REPLY BRIEF IN SUPPORT OF MOTION TO DISMISS

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Defendant, City of Eau Claire, by its attorneys, City Attorney, Stephen C. Nick and Deputy City Attorney, Douglas Hoffer, and by Municipal Law & Litigation Group, by special appearance and reserving all jurisdictional objections, submit this Reply Brief in Support of its Motion to Dismiss for failure to state a claim upon which relief can be granted, pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 802.06(2)(a)6.

INTRODUCTION

Voters With Facts’ notice of claim arguments are nothing more than a desperate attempt to avoid the consequences of the motion for sanctions filed by the City of Eau Claire. Voters With Facts’ brief demonstrates their certiorari action was filed more than six months after the challenged legislative TIF determinations became final. The failure to bring a certiorari lawsuit

within six months of challenged actions constitutes laches as a matter of law, and the City of Eau Claire is not required to satisfy the elements of laches.

The six-month deadline to file a certiorari action has been settled law in Wisconsin for over fifty years, and the cases cited by the City of Eau Claire on this issue remain good law and constitute binding authority. Additionally, the only appellate opinion to ever speak on the applicability of this deadline to TIF challenges stated that TIF certiorari challenges must be brought within six months. Contrary to Voters With Facts' assertion, the notice of claim statute does not eliminate the six-month deadline to bring certiorari actions, and does not provide an opportunity to expand deadlines to bring lawsuits. The Court can analyze Voters With Facts' notice of claim argument in two ways. First, if the Court assumes the notice of claim statute applies, the lawsuit was not timely. Second, if the Court assumes the notice of claim statute does not apply, the lawsuit was not timely. The Court must dismiss Voters With Facts' lawsuit using either analysis because in either instance they acted untimely in commencing this action.

Voters With Facts' failure to meet the mandatory six-month deadline is not the only deficiency requiring dismissal of this action. Voters With Facts did not plead sufficient facts to meet Wisconsin's pleading standards. Voters With Facts' response brief further demonstrates the inadequacy of the complaint filed in this case by presenting additional facts regarding the Eau Claire City Council disallowing the tax exempt claim on the Aspenson Mogensen building it failed to include in its complaint. The Court should disregard these additional facts in undertaking its motion to dismiss analysis. Voters With Facts do not plead sufficient facts to demonstrate the Joint Review Board's actions were illegal, and thus Voters With Facts lack standing. Issue preclusion also bars Voters With Facts' claims.

1. The Court should dismiss this case because the action was not timely filed.

The Court should dismiss this case because the action was filed after the six-month deadline established for certiorari actions. Voters With Facts' response brief demonstrates their certiorari action was filed more than six months after the challenged actions became final. Because parties must file certiorari actions within six months of challenged actions this lawsuit was not timely filed and must be dismissed. The six-month deadline to file a certiorari action has been settled law in Wisconsin for over fifty years, and is binding on this Court. *State ex rel. Casper v. Bd of Trustees of Wisconsin Ret. Fund*, 30 Wis. 2d 170, 174-75, 140 N.W.2d 301, 303 (1966); *State ex rel Czapiewski v. Milwaukee City Service Commission*, 54 Wis. 2d 535, 196 N.W.2d 742 (1972); *State ex rel. Enk v. Mentkowski*, 76 Wis. 2d 565, 574-77, 252 N.W.2d 28 (1977). The failure to bring a certiorari action within six months constitutes laches as a matter of law, and parties are not required to provide additional evidence demonstrating laches. *Casper*, 30 Wis. 2d at 174-76 (Where statute does not prescribe the time within which the right to review must be exercised, such right must be exercised within six months. This approach is "akin to the action of courts of equity in holding that the period of the statute of limitations applicable to a legal right is to be considered laches applicable to the equitable right without injury into any change of circumstances."); *Czapiewski*, 54 Wis. 2d at 538-39; *Mentkowski*, 76 Wis. 2d at 575-76 ("This court has applied a definite rule that certiorari proceedings must be commenced within six months of the action sought to be reviewed and parties who fail to so commence the proceedings are guilty of laches.") (emphasis added).

The only appellate opinion to ever speak on the applicability of this deadline to TIF challenges stated that TIF certiorari challenges must be brought within six months. *State ex rel. Olson v. City of Baraboo Joint Review Bd.*, 2002 WI App 64, ¶¶ 31-32, 252 Wis. 2d 628, 643 N.W.2d 796 (Roggensack, J., dissenting on other grounds) ("No statutory appeal process has

been created to review the formation of a TIF district; therefore, the review of the decision of both the common council and the JRB is by certiorari” and “[a]n action requesting certiorari review must be commenced within six months of when the decision for which review is sought becomes final.”) (emphasis added). Voters With Facts attempts to diminish the persuasive value of the Roggensack opinion by saying it does not constitute binding precedent. Voters With Facts made a similar argument in front of the Wisconsin Supreme Court regarding the Roggensack opinion’s determination that certiorari is the standard of review for legislative TIF determinations, but the Wisconsin Supreme Court rejected that argument and cited to the Roggensack opinion on this point. *Voters with Facts v. City of Eau Claire*, 2018 WI 63, ¶ 70, 382 Wis. 2d 1, 52, 913 N.W.2d 131, 157 (“No statutory appeal process has been created to review the formation of a TID; therefore certiorari review of the decisions of both the City Common Council and the JRB is appropriate.”).

a. Wisconsin’s notice of claim statute does not eliminate the six-month common law deadline to bring a common law certiorari action.

Wisconsin’s notice of claim statute does not eliminate the six-month deadline to bring a common law certiorari action challenging legislative TIF determinations. Voters With Facts notice of claim arguments ask this Court to ignore binding authority, to ignore relevant notice of claim case law, to ignore the purpose of the notice of claim statute, and to reward Voters With Facts for sitting on their claims for a year and a half.

The Court can examine the notice of claim issue raised by Voters With Facts in two ways. First, the Court can assume the notice of claim statute applies to certiorari actions challenging legislative TIF determinations. Second, the Court can assume certiorari actions challenging legislative TIF determinations are exempt from notice of claim requirements. Voters With Facts’ lawsuit must be dismissed using either analysis.

b. Even if the Court assumes the notice of claim statute applies, the notice of claim statute does not eliminate the six-month deadline to bring a certiorari action.

First, even if the Court assumes the notice of claim statute applies, the notice of claim statute does not eliminate the six-month deadline to bring a certiorari action. *See* Antonin Scalia & Bryan Garner, *Reading Law: The Interpretation of Legal Texts*, 318-19 (A statute will be construed to alter the common law only when that disposition is clear). Instead, if one assumes the notice of claim statute applies, this requires litigants challenging legislative TIF determinations to file a notice of claim within 60 days of the challenged order becoming final. By bringing a notice of claim within 60 days, a party waiting 120 days for a claim disallowance can still timely file a certiorari action.

Voters With Facts' assertion that 60 days does not provide sufficient time to conduct a pre-filing investigation is meritless, and ignores various deadlines to bring similar actions. Legislative TIF determinations take place in noticed public meetings, and the record considered by city councils and joint review boards are public records available for inspection. 60 days is more than sufficient time to conduct a reasonable inquiry before filing a notice of claim, especially where the potential plaintiffs have attended the noticed public meetings. Additionally, 60 days to file a notice of claim is consistent with the deadline to bring a variety of similar actions. *See* Wis. Stat. § 893.75 (Actions challenging validity of municipal contracts must be brought within 60 days); Wis. Stat. § 893.77 (Actions challenging validity of any municipal obligation must be brought within 30 days); Wis. Stat. § 68.13 (Actions challenging review of municipal administrative decisions must be brought by certiorari within 30 days); Wis. Stat. § 893.73 (Actions challenging the act of a town board or Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources establishing a town sanitary district, or contesting the validity of are barred if not brought within 90 days; Similar to six-month deadline to bring certiorari action, the following

actions are barred if not brought within 180 days: 1) actions to contest the validity of county zoning ordinance or amendment; 2) actions to review the validity of proceedings for division or dissolution of a town under § 60.03).

Because similar challenges have similar deadlines to bring legal challenges, reconciling the notice of claim statute and the six-month certiorari filing deadline are not as difficult or unique as Voters With Facts allege. TIF challenges illustrate why the failure to bring a certiorari action within six months constitutes laches as a matter of law. First, waiting more than 6 months to bring a certiorari action challenging legislative TIF determinations is unreasonable. The challenged legislative TIF determinations took place in noticed public meetings in September of 2017, and the municipal record in front of these legislative bodies are public records available for inspection. Voters With Facts filed their notice of claim on January 12, 2018. They then waited until April 17, 2019 to file the present action. Voters With Facts lacks any legal justification, or even a practical explanation, to wait so long when it is the hallmark of the judicial system to encourage timely commencement of legal controversies.

Voters With Facts justifications for the delay bring George Washington's famous line to mind: "it is better to offer no excuse than a bad one." Voters With Facts' weak justifications bolster the validity of the City of Eau Claire's motion for sanctions because the excuses demonstrate Voters With Facts did not undertake a reasonable inquiry prior to filing this case. Voters With Facts say it was reasonable to wait until after the Wisconsin Supreme Court issued a decision in a prior TIF lawsuit brought by Voters With Facts against the City of Eau Claire. This argument makes no sense, and they provide no legal authority to support it. There are often pending appellate decisions that may impact ongoing lawsuits. Pending appellate decisions that may impact a case do not excuse failing to timely file a lawsuit. Instead, prudent parties file the lawsuit and then ask the Court for a scheduling order that anticipates the possible impact of the

appellate decision. Even if waiting for the Supreme Court decision was reasonable – which is a quite dubious assertion – Voters With Facts then waited an additional 10 months since the issuance of that decision on June 6, 2018 to bring this lawsuit. That is patently unreasonable.

Waiting on the Wisconsin Supreme Court decision (plus another 10 months) is not the only implausible excuse Voters With Facts offers for its delay. Voters With Facts also suggests it was reasonable to wait to confirm whether the City Council would disallow the tax exempt claim for the Aspenson Mogensen building that was filed by an unrelated party on January 30, 2019 (or almost 8 months after the Wisconsin Supreme Court issued the decision in the prior case). Voters With Facts speculate, incorrectly, that the tax exempt status of one part of one building in a TIF district might possibly lead to the City of Eau Claire to withdraw the entire TIF district at some point in the future. It was thus reasonable to ignore the well settled six-month certiorari filing deadline, and wait until the City of Eau Claire disallowed the tax exempt claim to bring this lawsuit. Like their other excuse, the complaint does not plead any facts related to this excuse, so the Court should not consider it in applying the motion to dismiss standard. Nevertheless, in the interest of demonstrating how outrageous this assertion is, the City of Eau Claire will take a moment to address it.

It is unclear why a Court should disregard a mandatory filing deadline if it is possible “the district may have been voluntarily repealed.” Furthermore, Voters With Facts provide no legal authority to support a conclusion that a court could disregard a mandatory filing deadline even if the excuse was plausible, which this excuse is not. If Voters With Facts were actually aware of the tax exempt claim and based their decision to wait to file the action to see if the City Council would disallow this claim – an incredible assertion considering the claim was not filed until 8 months after the Supreme Court issued the prior decision - Voters With Facts would have alluded to this fact in their complaint. Additionally, if the timing of this action was actually

impacted by the tax exempt status of the Aspenson Mogensen building then Voters With Facts would have brought this action much earlier. The tax exempt claim was disallowed by the City Council on February 26, 2019, but Voters With Facts waited until April 17, 2019 to bring this action. The additional delay clearly had nothing to do with the timing of this suit. This suit was brought late because counsel for Voters With Facts did not conduct a reasonable pre-filing inquiry, or as indicated in the City of Eau Claire's motion for sanctions, as another opportunity to harass, delay, or to give Voters With Facts more opportunities to publicize their policy disagreements with TIF.

c. The six-month deadline to bring a certiorari claim appropriately recognizes the prejudice allowing longer time limits would have on communities and private businesses undertaking redevelopment projects.

The six-month deadline to bring a certiorari claim appropriately recognizes the prejudice allowing longer time limits would have on communities undertaking important redevelopment projects, and also considers the prejudice on private sector developers and other private businesses engaging in redevelopment projects. TIF is the most commonly used economic development tool available to local communities. Redevelopment projects often involve risks to both the community and to private sector developers. Allowing an unlimited amount of time to bring TIF challenge increases the risks and costs associated with development thus prejudicing both communities and private sector businesses engaged in redevelopment.

d. Equity does not favor Voters With Facts.

Among the more novel arguments included in Voters With Facts brief is an argument that the City of Eau Claire's decision not to issue a formal disallowance – which by operation of law constitutes a disallowance after 120 days – means the City of Eau Claire “lacks clean hands.” Voters With Facts offer no authority in support of this contention, and it warrants little additional argument. Before a court may deny a plaintiff relief in equity upon the “clean hands” doctrine, it

must clearly appear that the things from which the party seeks relief are the fruit of its own wrongful or unlawful course of conduct. *S & M Rotogravure Serv., Inc. v. Baer*, 77 Wis. 2d 454, 467, 252 N.W.2d 913, 919 (1977). Arguing that allowing 120 days to pass so that a disallowance occurs as a matter of law is either “wrongful” or “unlawful” is meritless.

e. Assuming the notice of claim statute does not apply to certiorari actions challenging legislative TIF determinations, then this case must be dismissed.

If the notice of claim statute does not apply to certiorari actions challenging legislative TIF determinations, then the Court must dismiss this case. A number of certiorari actions are exempt from the notice of claim statute because courts have concluded the notice of claim requirements contradict those actions. Voters With Facts do not address why the Court should treat common law certiorari actions challenging legislative TIF determinations differently than those actions which are exempt from the notice of claim requirements. *See Auchinleck v. Town of LaGrange*, 200 Wis. 2d 585, 547 N.W.2d 587 (1996) (actions under the Open Meetings Law are exempt); *Kapischke v. County of Walworth*, 226 Wis. 2d 320, 595 N.W.2d 42 (App. 1999) (certiorari review of county zoning decisions under § 59.694(10) are exempt); *Zelman v. Town of Erin*, 2018 WI App. 50, 383 Wis. 2d 679, 917 N.W.2d 222 (certiorari review of conditional use permit determinations are exempt).

In determining whether claims may be exempt from Wis. Stat. § 893.80 notice requirements, courts examine: 1) is there a specific statutory scheme; 2) would enforcement hinder preference for prompt resolution; and 3) would the purpose of § 893.80 be furthered by requiring notice. *EZ Roll Off v. Oneida Co.*, 2011 WI 71, 335 Wis. 2d 720, 800 N.W. 2d 421. Wisconsin courts have articulated a variety of claims that are exempt from § 893.80 notice requirements. *Kettner v. Wausau Ins. Co.*, 191 Wis. 2d 723, 530 N.W.2d 399 (App. 1995) (Claims against independent contractors - except those in a relationship with municipality “master-servant”); *Envirologix Corp. v. City of Waukesha*, 192 Wis. 2d 277, 531 N.W.2d 357

(App. 1995) (Claims against independent contractors - except those in a relationship with municipality. "principal-agent"); *Hasslinger v. Village of Hartland*, 234 Wis. 201, 205, 290 N.W. 647 (1940) (Claims for abatement of nuisance); *Hillcrest Golf v. Altoona*, 135 Wis. 2d 431, 441, 400 N.W.2d 493 (App. 1986) (Claims for abatement of nuisance).

To the extent Wisconsin's notice of claim statute is incompatible with the six-month deadline to bring a certiorari action, courts should not resolve this conflict by allowing litigants like Voters With Facts to wait a year and a half to bring a claim. Instead, consistent with Wisconsin's TIF law statutory scheme, the preference for prompt resolution, and furthering the purposes of the notice of claim statute, certiorari claims challenging legislative TIF determinations should be exempt from Wisconsin's notice of claim statute and the six-month certiorari filing deadline should apply.

The Court should not turn the six-month certiorari filing deadline into a farce. Wisconsin's TIF law contains no express statutory method of review, so common law certiorari applies. *Voters*, 382 Wis. 2d 1 at ¶ 70. The absence of an express method of review in Wisconsin's TIF statute means the legislature intended common law certiorari to serve as the method of review, and intended TIF related certiorari actions to be governed by common law requirements (such as the six-month deadline). *See C & A Investments v. Kelly*, 2010 WI App 151, ¶ 10, 330 Wis. 2d 223, 229, 792 N.W.2d 644, 647 (The legislature is presumed to know the state of the law when it enacts legislation."); *See Antonin Scalia & Bryan Garner, Reading Law: The Interpretation of Legal Texts*, 318-19 (A statute will be construed to alter the common law only when that disposition is clear). Applying the notice of claim statute in the manner advocated by Voters With Facts would hinder the preference for prompt resolution of TIF related certiorari actions. The notice of claim statute serves two purposes: (1) to give governmental entities the opportunity to investigate and evaluate potential claims, and (2) to afford

governmental entities the opportunity to compromise and budget for potential settlement or litigation. *Thorp v. Town of Lebanon*, 2000 WI 60, ¶¶ 23, 28, 235 Wis.2d 610, 612 N.W.2d 59. Neither of these purposes is served by eliminating the six-month deadline to bring a certiorari action.

Casper, Czapiewski, Mentkowski, and Judge Roggensack's dissenting opinion in *Baraboo* demonstrate that certiorari actions must be brought within six months of when the decision for which review is sought becomes final. The Supreme Court characterized the six-month deadline to bring a certiorari action as "definite." Voters With Facts' complaint and Notice of Claim demonstrate this action was not brought within six months and is therefore untimely. Voters With Facts argument, that a common law deadline cannot apply to a common law certiorari action is meritless. Accordingly, the Court should apply settled law and dismiss this action.

2. The Court should dismiss this case because the complaint fails to plead sufficient facts to state a claim, the Plaintiffs lack standing, and issue preclusion bars Plaintiffs' claims.

The Court should dismiss this case because the complaint fails to plead sufficient facts to state a claim, the Plaintiffs lack standing, and issue preclusion bars the Plaintiffs' claims.

a. Failure to state a claim

The Court should dismiss this action because the Joint Review Board applied a correct theory of law. The arguments raised by Voters With Facts contradict settled law. The Court should apply *Baraboo* and dismiss this case because as a matter of law the existence of a single development within a TIF district does not invalidate an entire TIF district. *State ex rel. Olson v. City of Baraboo Joint Review Bd.*, 2002 WI App 64, 252 Wis. 2d 628, 643 N.W.2d 796. Voters With Facts have not pleaded sufficient facts to distinguish *Baraboo*, which constitutes binding authority. Furthermore, Voters With Facts' response brief further demonstrates the inadequacy of the complaint filed in this case by presenting additional facts it asks the Court to consider in

support of its arguments. The complaint pleads no facts regarding the City Council disallowing the tax exempt claim for the Aspenson Mogensen building, and courts examining motions to dismiss only examine well pleaded facts in the complaint. If the complaint contained sufficient pleaded facts to support its claims Voters With Facts would not need to present additional facts, and the Court should either strike or disregard these additional facts.

Other than the allegation that the Aspenson Mogensen development was already underway, the complaint is completely devoid of well pleaded facts relevant to the but-for determination. (Compl. ¶¶ 29-35, 42). Voters With Facts now allege that mentioning “a developer had already informed the City that he intended to develop two whole blocks within TID #12 whether or not TID-funded improvements were built” is sufficient to distinguish *Baraboo*. It is not. First, *Baraboo* demonstrates that but-for determination challenges must address development throughout the district, not an isolated parcel or parcels. Second, alleging an unspecified developer informed the City of Eau Claire that he intended to develop an unspecified property is not sufficient to meet the plausibility standard even if one assumes this is not simply another paragraph referring to the Aspenson Mogensen development.

Baraboo demonstrates that alleging particular development(s) in a TIF district would occur without TIF is not sufficient to invalidate a TID. A party seeking to challenge a but-for determination must plead facts demonstrating no other future development in the district needs TIF supported project costs to occur. Contrary to Voters With Facts argument, the City of Eau Claire does not overstate Wisconsin’s pleading standards. Voters With Facts made similar pleading standard arguments in front of the Wisconsin Supreme Court in a prior case. The Wisconsin Supreme Court rejected Voters With Facts’ interpretation of Wisconsin’s pleading standards, and held that Wisconsin’s well pleaded complaint rule tracks the federal plausibility pleading standard articulated in *Twombly*:

Thus, Plaintiffs' allegations fail to state a claim upon which relief can be granted because, even if taken as true, they establish only the possibility that funds could be used to pay for the demolition of historic buildings. This is not “enough heft to ‘sho[w] that the pleader is entitled to relief.’ ” *Data Key Partners*, 356 Wis. 2d 665, ¶ 26, 849 N.W.2d 693 (alteration in original) (quoting *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 557, 127 S.Ct. 1955, 167 L.Ed.2d 929 (2007)). “ ‘[I]t gets the complaint close to stating a claim, but without some further factual enhancement it stops short of the line between possibility and plausibility of entitle[ment] to relief.’ ” *Id.* (second alteration in original) (quoting *Bell Atl. Corp.*, 550 U.S. at 557, 127 S.Ct. 1955).

Voters with Facts v. City of Eau Claire, 2018 WI 63, ¶ 55, 382 Wis. 2d 1, 42, 913 N.W.2d 131, 151–52. *Voters with Facts* failed to plead sufficient facts distinguishing this case from *Baraboo*, and thus they failed to plead sufficient facts to state a claim.

Voters With Facts attempt to distinguish *Baraboo* by stating that *Baraboo* reached a holding after conducting certiorari review rather than at the motion to dismiss stage. This argument is meritless because even if all well pleaded facts (and reasonable inferences) in the Complaint were true there is not sufficient factual differences to distinguish *Baraboo*. *Voters With Facts* are making the same argument raised in *Baraboo*, and that argument fails as a matter of law.

b. Voters With Facts lack standing.

Mere disagreement with legislative decisions is not sufficient to confer standing. Demonstrating taxpayer standing is contingent upon the affected taxpayer(s) sufficiently alleging the unlawfulness of a particular expenditure. Without sufficient facts demonstrating a particular expenditure is unlawful, there is not sufficient injury to demonstrate standing. *S.D. Realty Co. v. Sewerage Comm’n.*, 15 Wis. 2d 15, 21-22, 112 N.W.2d 177 (1961); *Krier v. Vilione*, 2009 WI 45, ¶ 22, 317 Wis. 2d 288, 766 N.W.2d 517; and *Foley-Ciccantelli v. Bishop’s Grove Condominium Ass’n., Inc.*, 2011 WI 36, 333 Wis. 2d 402, 797 N.W.2d 789. *Voters With Facts*

argument, that simply including the phrase “illegal expenditure” in a pleading is sufficient to confer standing, is inconsistent with Wisconsin’s standing jurisprudence.

Voters With Facts’ arguments have no basis in Wisconsin law, and they have not pleaded sufficient facts to demonstrate the Joint Review Board’s action was illegal. Thus the Court should dismiss this case because Voters With Facts lack standing. Other injuries alleged in the complaint are highly speculative, and are insufficient to demonstrate standing.

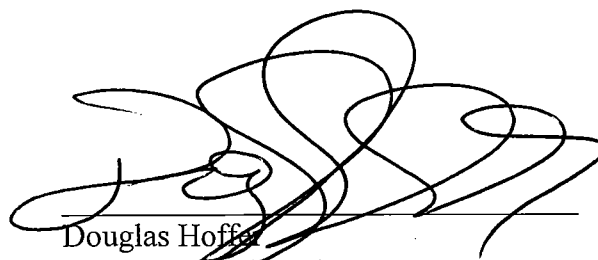
c. Issue Preclusion requires dismissal.

The Plaintiffs’ causes of action are barred by the doctrine of Issue Preclusion. “[O]nce an issue is actually and necessarily determined by a court of competent jurisdiction, that determination is conclusive in subsequent suits based on a different cause of action involving a party to the prior litigation.” *Paige K.B. v. Steven G.B.*, 226 Wis. 2d 210, 594 N.W.2d 370 (1999) (citing *Montana v. United States*, 440 U.S. 147, 153, 99 S.Ct. 970 (1979)). Contrary to Voters With Facts arguments, both issue preclusion steps are satisfied in the present case, and Voters With Facts fail to adequately engage the substantive arguments on issue preclusion.

CONCLUSION

For all the foregoing reasons the Court should dismiss this case.

Dated: June 26th, 2019



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