

Seaside Park settles racially charged Sawmill Cafe lawsuit for \$2.5 million

Written by Dustin Racioppi @dracioppi

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SEASIDE PARK — The borough has settled a long-running and racially charged legal feud with the former owner of the Sawmill Cafe, who alleged officials abused their power by trying to prevent black bands from performing at the boardwalk club, according to a statement.

The settlement with former Sawmill owner Stephen D’Onofrio, announced on Tuesday for \$2.5 million, is believed to be the largest payout in the borough’s history, according to the statement from Jaffe Communications.

D’Onofrio claimed in the 160-page civil rights complaint that more than 50 Seaside Park officials, from the borough council to the planning board to the police department, “inappropriately interfered” with his operation in order to prevent black bands from performing at the cafe’s second-floor “Green Room” from 2004 to 2009.

“Racism and intolerance remain alive and well in Seaside Park,” according to the complaint.

The coordinated effort to purge black performances at the Sawmill was known as part of “The Program,” an effort by top officials to put pressure on business owners and land developers, and involved a host of restrictions on the cafe, according to the complaint. After the rap artist Method Man performed at the Green Room in 2004, the borough council put restrictions on the Sawmill’s liquor license; the cafe had its certificate of occupancy revoked; and the governing body passed a midnight closing rule on the bar after a portion of the restaurant’s ceiling caught fire, according to the statement.

Neither D’Onofrio nor his attorney, Philip Davolos, of the Chance and McCann law firm in Bridgeton, could immediately be reached for comment.

D’Onofrio sold the establishment in 2009.

Read more about this story in tomorrow’s Asbury Park Press.