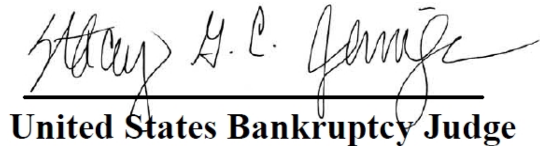
Docket #4069 Date Filed: 05/21/2024

CLERK, U.S. BANKRUPTCY COURT
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS

ENTERED

THE DATE OF ENTRY IS ON
THE COURT'S DOCKET

The following constitutes the ruling of the court and has the force and effect therein described.



Signed May 21, 2024

United States Bankruptcy Judge

**IN THE UNITED STATES BANKRUPTCY COURT
FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS
DALLAS DIVISION**

IN RE:	§	
	§	**Chapter 11**
HIGHLAND CAPITAL MANAGEMENT, L.P.,	§	
	§	**Case No. 19-34054-sgj-11**
Reorganized Debtor.	§	

ORDER DENYING MOTION OF NEXPOINT REAL ESTATE PARTNERS, LLC (F/K/A HCRE PARTNERS, LLC) SEEKING RELIEF FROM ORDER PURSUANT TO FED. R. OF BANKR. P. 9024 AND FED. R. CIV. P. 60(b)(1) & (6)

On March 18, 2024, NexPoint Real Estate Partners, LLC (f/k/a HCRE Partners, LLC) ("HCRE") filed its *Motion for Relief from Order* (hereinafter, the "Rule 60(b) Motion"),[1] seeking reconsideration of and relief from this court's *Memorandum Opinion and Order Granting Highland Capital Management, L.P.'s Motion for (A) Bad Faith Finding and (B) Attorneys' Fees against NexPoint Real Estate Partners, LLC (f/k/a HCRE Partners, LLC) in connection with Proof*

[1] Bankr. Dkt. No. 4040.

1934054240521000000000001

of Claim # 146 ("HCRE Sanctions Order").[2] The parties stipulated to a briefing schedule and that the parties would seek a setting for a hearing ("Hearing") on the Rule 60(b) Motion. On April 22, 2024, Highland Capital Management, L.P. ("Highland" or "Reorganized Debtor") filed its response ("Response") in opposition to the Rule 60(b) Motion,[3] and HCRE filed its reply ("Reply") thereto on May 1, 2024.[4] The parties presented oral argument at the Hearing that was held on May 16, 2024.

HCRE and its Proof of Claim. By way of background, HCRE is an entity whose sole manager is James D. Dondero, the former Chief Executive Officer of the Reorganized Debtor. HCRE and Highland were essentially friendly business partners prepetition—not terribly surprising, as they each had the same chief executive. In any event, HCRE and Highland were equity owners/members of a limited liability company named SE Multifamily Holdings, LLC ("SE").[5] SE owned valuable real estate. SE was only formed in March 2019 and was governed by an amended LLC Agreement ("SE's LLC Agreement"). After Highland filed Chapter 11 in October 2019, and later became managed by three new independent directors and a new CRO and then new CEO, James Seery, Highland and HCRE were no longer amicable business partners. In fact, HCRE filed a proof of claim in Highland's bankruptcy case (on April 8, 2020), for an unliquidated sum, which was electronically signed by Mr. Dondero. The proof of claim asserted that HCRE had a claim against Highland to reduce Highland's equity ownership and rights in SE and, further, that it had grounds to reform, rescind, or modify SE's LLC Agreement based on a mutual mistake.[6] Two years and four months after HCRE filed the proof of claim, on August 12,

---

[2] Bankr. Dkt. Nos. 4038 & 4039.
[3] Bankr. Dkt. No. 4052.
[4] Bankr. Dkt. No. 4055.
[5] Note that there was also an unrelated minority owner (6%) in SE called BH Equities, LLC.
[6] Claim No. 146 & Bankr. Dkt. No. 1212.

2022, and after significant discovery and litigation regarding the proof of claim, HCRE moved to withdraw the proof of claim.

HCRE's Motion to Withdraw its Proof of Claim. There's a rule for withdrawing a proof of claim: Fed. R. Bankr. P. 3006. The bankruptcy court set a hearing, on September 12, 2022, as required by this rule, on HCRE's motion to withdraw the proof of claim ("Sept. 12, 2022 Proof of Claim Withdrawal Hearing").[7] After extensive discussion on the record, the bankruptcy court denied HCRE permission to withdraw its proof of claim—primarily because HCRE declined to withdraw the proof of claim with prejudice to any future litigation in any forum pertaining to the issues raised in the proof of claim. In other words, HCRE would not state unequivocally that it would not re-urge in the future its alleged present entitlement to reform or rescind SE's LLC Agreement. To be clear, HCRE expressed that it would withdraw its proof of claim with prejudice to re-asserting it in the bankruptcy court, and with prejudice to filing any appeal of a bankruptcy court order on same. ***But this type of withdrawal meant little—because the deadline/bar date for filing proofs of claim in the Highland bankruptcy case had passed 16 months earlier anyway***. HCRE would be time-barred from asserting its proof of claim at this late stage in the Highland bankruptcy case. The bankruptcy court was concerned that HCRE was attempting to preserve its present claims against Highland for use in the future in a different forum.[8] If there was going to be litigation over these issues, Highland thought it was time to get on with such litigation. The bankruptcy court was persuaded that, indeed, Highland would be prejudiced if HCRE were allowed to withdraw its proof of claim without clear and unequivocal language in the order that HCRE would not be able to assert its claims and/or theories regarding rescission and/or

[7] Bankr. Dkt. No. 3519 (Transcript).
[8] At the time, it appeared that litigation might be on the horizon in state court involving these parties and regarding business records production.

reformation of the SE LLC Agreement in any future litigation in any court or forum (after all, future litigation is not what a "fresh start" of bankruptcy is about). Thus, the bankruptcy court issued its Order denying withdrawal of the HCRE proof of claim on September 14, 2022 ("Order Denying Withdrawal of HCRE Proof of Claim").[9]

Trial on the HCRE Proof of Claim. Thereafter, the bankruptcy court held a trial on November 1, 2022, on the merits of HCRE's proof of claim and ultimately disallowed the proof of claim ("Claim Disallowance Order").[10] There was no evidence presented of any sort of mistake, mutual or otherwise, in connection with SE's LLC Agreement or any other basis for reformation or rescission of SE's LLC Agreement. Moreover, Mr. Dondero testified that he had not even read the HCRE proof of claim or conducted any due diligence regarding the HCRE proof of claim before authorizing his electronic signature to be affixed to it. HCRE did not appeal the Claim Disallowance Order.

Highland Motion for Sanctions Against HCRE. Highland thereafter filed a written motion for sanctions pertaining to HCRE conduct surrounding the proof of claim—seeking a bad faith finding and reimbursement of Highland's attorney's fees caused by HCRE's actions. Several months later (after, among other things, renewed attempts at global mediation of the remaining issues in the Highland bankruptcy case), the bankruptcy court granted Highland's motion for sanctions, after a contested hearing ("Order Imposing Sanctions").[11] The Order Imposing Sanctions (which shifted to HCRE approximately $825,000 of the Reorganized Debtor's attorney's fees and expenses incurred by Highland in connection with the HCRE proof of claim—which was less than the entire amount that the Reorganized Debtor had incurred regarding the HCRE proof

[9] Bankr. Dkt. No. 3518.
[10] Bankr. Dkt. No. 3766 & 3767.
[11] Bankr. Dkt. No. 4039.

of claim during the more than three years since it was filed)[12] is the order now subject to HCRE's Rule 60(b) Motion.

<u>The Rule 60(b) Motion.</u> HCRE argues, primarily, that the bankruptcy court made two core, related "mistakes" in connection with its Order Imposing Sanctions that it should correct pursuant to Rule 60(b)(1). First, the bankruptcy court allegedly made a "mistake" in refusing to permit HCRE to withdraw its proof of claim based on a mistaken belief by the bankruptcy court that HCRE was not willing to withdraw it with prejudice for all purposes. HCRE now stresses that it was, indeed, willing to withdraw the proof of claim with prejudice to any future litigation in any court—not just in the bankruptcy court. Second, HCRE further argues that the bankruptcy court's mistake of fact on this point caused it to erroneously require an unnecessary trial on the proof of claim—the result of which was Highland incurring/billing unnecessary fees relating to the proof of claim. The bankruptcy court then shifted those fees to HCRE in the Order Imposing Sanctions. HCRE asserts that it is incorrect as a matter of law to conclude that these fees would not have been incurred "but for" HCRE's bad faith conduct. *See Goodyear Tire & Rubber v. Haeger*, 581 U.S. 101, 108 (2017). Therefore, the bankruptcy court should not have shifted them to HCRE as part of the Order Imposing Sanctions.

The court denies the Rule 60(b) Motion. To be sure, this court does not disagree with HCRE that a mistake of fact ***or*** mistake of law can be grounds for granting a Rule 60(b) motion. *See Kemp v. United States*, 596 U.S. 528, 535-36 (2022). The court also does not disagree with

[12] Highland sought attorney's fees and expenses incurred relating to the HCRE proof of claim from the time period of August 1, 2021 through December 31, 2022. The HCRE proof of claim was filed April 8, 2020. Highland not only did not seek any reimbursement for any time and expense for the first 16 months after HCRE filed its proof of claim, but Highland ultimately did not seek (and the bankruptcy court did not allow) any fees that Highland incurred in successfully moving to disqualify HCRE's counsel in this matter, Wick Phillips (note: Wick Phillips was actually the second law firm that HCRE retained pertaining to its proof of claim; a different law firm originally filed the HCRE proof of claim (Bonds Ellis), followed by Wick Philips, and then the Hoge & Gameros, L.L.P. law firm took over, and now the law firm of Reichman Jergensen Lehman & Feldberg LLP is representing HCRE in this matter.

HCRE that an award of fees relating to sanctionable conduct must be limited to fees that would not have been incurred "but for" the sanctionable conduct. *Goodyear Tire*, 581 U.S. 101 at 104, 108 (the "causal link" between the sanctionable conduct and the opposing party's attorney's fees must be established through a "but-for" test; the complaining party may only recover the portion of fees that would not have been paid but-for the sanctionable conduct). However, the bankruptcy court does not believe it made a mistake of fact or of law with regard to either of these points.

First, the bankruptcy court does not believe it made a mistake of fact in interpreting what HCRE was and was not willing to do in connection with its motion to withdraw its proof of claim at the Sept. 12, 2022 Proof of Claim Withdrawal Hearing. HCRE used hedging language, to the extent that it appeared to be willfully obtuse on this point. It was not willing to withdraw the proof of claim ***with prejudice to ever litigating the issues raised in the proof of claim***. It was not future conduct and future theories that HCRE was worried about preserving in future litigation, and the bankruptcy court was certainly not engaging in a mission to ban all future litigation between these parties in perpetuity. The sole concern was about ***claims/theories in the HCRE proof of claim*** being resurrected somewhere else in the future. The transcript of the September 12, 2022 hearing is clear that there was much discussion on this point, and the court even gave the parties a 24-hour break to go talk outside the presence of the court—to hopefully wordsmith an agreed order withdrawing the proof of claim. Apparently, the parties could not reach an agreement on this relatively simple concept. So, the court would not allow withdrawal of the HCRE proof of claim without clarity that the proof of claim issues would not be raised in future litigation somewhere. The court set a trial on the merits of the proof of claim a few weeks later, as the parties were close to being trial-ready. Moreover, a review of the September 12, 2022 Transcript reflects that the bankruptcy court focused on multiple factors in disallowing withdrawal of the HCRE proof of

claim—the so-called *Manchester* factors—not simply the failure of HCRE to withdraw the proof of claim with prejudice to all future litigation. *Manchester, Inc. v. Lyle (In re Manchester, Inc.)*, 2008 Bankr. LEXIS 3312, *11-12 (Bankr. N.D. Tex. Dec. 19, 2008) (the *Manchester* factors include: (1) the movant's diligence in bringing the motion to withdraw, (2) any "undue vexatiousness" on the part of the movant, (3) the extent to which the suit has progressed, including the effort and expense undertaken by the non-moving party to prepare for trial, (4) the duplicative expense of re-litigation, and (5) the adequacy of the movant's explanation for the need to withdraw the claim). In other words, there were several factors that caused the bankruptcy court to deny withdrawal of the HCRE proof of claim.

Moreover, even if the court did make a mistake of fact in interpreting what HCRE was and was not willing to do (i.e., in deciphering what "with prejudice" did or did not mean)—and, in relying on this as a basis to deny HCRE permission to withdraw its proof of claim--wouldn't this have been an error of the bankruptcy court in entering its Order Denying Withdrawal of HCRE Proof of Claim? This order—entered September 14, 2023—was not appealed. Nor was the subsequent Order Disallowing Claim. In some ways, the Rule 60(b) Motion smacks of being a collateral attack on the Order Denying Withdrawal of Proof of Claim which was never appealed. Had there been an appeal of it, it would have been apparent that it was a multi-faceted decision, based on many factors (i.e., the *Manchester* factors)—not merely the "with prejudice" issues.[13]

Which leads to the last issue—was there a mistake of law in allowing reimbursement of Highland's fees and expense incurred ***after*** the Order Denying Withdrawal of HCRE Proof of Claim? In particular, over $300,000 of fees were incurred by Highland (and shifted by the court in the Order Imposing Sanctions) associated with the preparation for and trial on the HCRE proof

[13] Bankr. Dkt. No. 3519 (Transcript, pp. 51-55).

of claim. Was this a mistake of law? Only if the bankruptcy court made a mistake in ordering that there would be a trial on the HCRE proof of claim (i.e., only if the bankruptcy court erred in entering its Order Denying Withdrawal of HCRE Proof of Claim, and, as noted above, that order was not appealed by HCRE). The court never would have ordered trial on the merits if not for HCRE's conduct (beginning with its bad faith filing of its proof of claim and including refusing to withdraw its proof of claim with prejudice to all future litigation on the issues raised in the proof of claim). Thus, Highland would not have incurred this $300,000+ in fees and expenses "but-for" HCRE's conduct.

Having considered the Rule 60(b) Motion, the Response, the Reply, and the argument of the parties, the court finds that there is no basis or justification for granting HCRE the relief requested in its Rule 60(b) Motion. Any arguments made in the Rule 60(b) Motion not herein addressed are denied.

Accordingly,

IT IS ORDERED that the Rule 60(b) Motion be, and hereby is, **DENIED**.

###END OF ORDER###