STATE OF WISCONSIN

BEFORE THE WISCONSIN EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS COMMISSION

GAIL P. GAWENDA, Appellant,

v.

Secretary, WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS, Respondent.

Case 1 No. 65882 PA(adv)-100

Decision No. 32401

GAIL P. GAWENDA, Appellant,

٧.

Secretary, WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS, and Administrator, DIVISION OF MERIT RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION, Respondents.

Case 2 No. 66750 PA(adv)-112

Decision No. 32402

Appearances:

Nicholas Fairweather, Attorney, Cullen Weston Pines & Bach, 122 West Washington Avenue, Suite 900, Madison, Wisconsin 53703, appearing for the Appellant, Gail Gawenda.

Christopher N. Green, General Counsel, P. O. Box 8861, Madison, Wisconsin 53708-8861, appearing on behalf of the Department of Financial Institutions.

ORDER GRANTING MOTION TO DISMISS, IN PART, AND DENYING MOTION FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT

These matters are before the Commission on Respondent's motion to dismiss cases 65882 (GAWENDA I) and 66750 (GAWENDA II) as well as the Appellant's motion for summary judgment in GAWENDA II. The final date for submitting written arguments was February 15, 2008.

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Having reviewed the record and being fully advised in the premises, the Commission makes and issues the following

FINDINGS OF FACT

- 1. Gail P. Gawenda began her employment with the Department of Financial Institutions (DFI) on July 12, 2004 in a half-time position classified as a Communications Officer. She filled position number 333168. Appellant attained permanent status in class.
- 2. The summary in the position description for the Appellant's position, dated March of 2004, included the following:

Under the general direction of the Executive Assistant, this position is responsible for overseeing and managing the Department's external communication and public relations program. The position manages and directs the comprehensive public information program for the department, researches, develops and monitors the strategic communications plan through consultation with the Secretary and Executive Assistant and other top level management staff, creates pro-active public information efforts relative to sensitive policy issues and advises the Secretary's Office and staff about opportunities and challenges that affect public opinion. . . .

GAWENDA I

- 3. While continuing to be employed by DFI, the agency assigned her to work at the Department of Agriculture Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), where she began on April 17, 2006.
- 4. Ms. Gawenda filed an appeal (GAWENDA I) with the Commission on May 11, 2006, contending that the duties she was performing while working at DATCP were inappropriate and were inconsistent with her classification.
- 5. Appellant is no longer assigned to DATCP and she is not performing those duties.
- 6. The 2005-07 biennial budget (2005 Wisconsin Act 25) reduced the number of authorized positions at DFI.

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7. In a memorandum dated April 25, 2006 from the Wisconsin Department of Administration, Respondent DFI was required to reconcile its position levels in the State Budget System with the State's "Position Management Information System" (PMIS):

The 2005-07 biennial budget (2005 Wisconsin Act 25) included position (FTE) [Full Time Equivalent] changes for many agencies. These were incorporated into the state budget (B-2) system, but not necessarily into position control. Because [the] state position control system must reflect positions authorized by law, corresponding changes may be needed in the PMIS [Position Management Information System] for central payroll agencies. The goal is to have the base year (2006-07) FTE positions reconciled between B-2 and PMIS. . . .

The attached materials showed that as of April 20, 2006 and as a result of the biennial budget, DFI was authorized by law to have 139.04 FTE positions. The same materials showed that DFI had to eliminate another 10.96 FTE positions in PMIS to reach the level mandated by the budget. There were 4 sources of changes in DFI staffing levels attributable to Act 25:

Budget efficiency measures Shared information services [SIS] Procurement Human resources and payroll benefits

- 8. In correspondence dated May 1, 2006, DFI notified the Department of Administration of "those positions being eliminated as part of Act 25. Positions eliminated here consist of 4 budget efficiency, 3HR, 0.5 procurement and 3.46 SIS." All of the listed positions reflected a termination date of May 1, 2006. One of the positions on that list was number 333168, a 0.46 FTE Communications Officer position. DFI had only one 0.50 FTE Communications Officer position as of May 1, 2006, and it was occupied by Appellant.
- 9. On June 19, 2006, Gawenda was returned to DFI and was notified of her work assignments:
 - On a daily basis, scan newspapers and websites for articles of interest and email those articles to all senior managers. . . .
 - Forward the daily Wheeler morning, noon and afternoon. . . .
 - Ensure the WorkWeb is kept up-to-date with appropriate listings, press announcements, work announcements, etc. You have the primary responsibility for WorkWeb content. . . .
 - Ensure the department's external website . . . is up-to-date, including, but not limited to: collecting information on a bi-weekly basis from appropriate agency staff . . . for the "Upcoming Events" section; provide updated and timely information under the "Consumer Tips" section . . . and changing Secretary Heinemann's welcome message on a monthly basis

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- Work with [specified individuals] . . . to update . . . brochures and create new ones to address timely financial topics. . . .
- Research projects related to press releases, as assigned.
- Other projects, as assigned.

In your absence, senior managers were given instructions as to how to handle press calls. All press calls are to be referred to me prior to any response. If I am not available, press calls are to be given to Chuck Evenson for a response. If neither one of us is available, Elizabeth Hickmann is to be notified of the contact by the press and she will get in touch with me or Chuck to coordinate a response. This system has worked well and will continue upon your return to the department.

10. Just two days later, by letter dated June 21, 2006, DFI notified Appellant:

I am writing to you to provide you information regarding the status of your position and the actions that the Department has had to take in order to accomplish its mandated position reductions. As you are aware, the Department of Financial Institutions and other agencies have had a series of position reductions to accomplish. These reductions are related to Efficiency Reductions, Server Consolidation, Human Resource Consolidation and Purchasing Consolidation.

As part of accomplishing the reductions, the agency was required to identify to the Department of Administration by May 1st, the position numbers to be eliminated. As part of that required process, DFI identified .46 of your .50 position for elimination. This position equivalency, along with the other positions identified, have [sic] been removed from our position authorization.

Unfortunately, the impact of the mandated reductions is that it is necessary for DFI to designate you as an employee who is "at-risk" of layoff. If you have not obtained employment in another position by the time the agency must reduce staffing to its authorized position level, it will be necessary to lay you off. A layoff could take place as late as June 30, 2007, but may be earlier depending on funding levels and instructions from the Department of Administration

11. On July 14, 2006, Appellant filed an amended appeal that encompassed both the June 19 assignment of duties (characterized by Appellant as an "elimination of job functions compris[ing] a demotion") and the June 21 letter that identified her position for elimination (characterized by Appellant as retaliation for her May 10 appeal and as "further evidence of DFI's intent to cause a reduction in Gawenda's classification level.")

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12. The parties subsequently agreed to the following statement of the issue for hearing in GAWENDA I:

Whether the Respondent constructively demoted the Appellant from her position as a Communications Officer, to the lower classification of Publications Editor or to the lower classification of Communications Specialist.

GAWENDA II

- 13. DFI's Personnel Director and Affirmative Action Officer signed the agency's "Non-Represented Layoff Plan" on January 9, 2007. The plan listed the Appellant as the sole employee scheduled to be laid off, effective January 26. The stated reason was "Elimination of Positions Due to Required Biennial Budget Reductions." At the time, Appellant was earning \$22.854 hourly.
- 14. Gawenda exercised her layoff rights and on January 13, 2007 accepted appointment into a full-time Securities Examiner position with DFI as a demotion in lieu of layoff, effective February 4, 2007. Her rate of pay was \$22.854 per hour. She was required to complete a probationary period.
- 15. Gawenda filed a second appeal (GAWENDA II) with the Commission on February 22, 2007, contending that the lay-off was without just cause.
- 16. She did not successfully complete probation in the Securities Examiner position and her employment was terminated effective August 1, 2007.
 - 17. In a letter dated August 10, 2007, she was informed:

In light of the termination, and the fact that you have no bumping rights that you can exercise and that we have no vacant positions that you are qualified for that we can offer you, we must now complete the planned layoff that you were notified of in the January 10, 2007 letter. The layoff is now effective August 1, 2007 rather than the originally noticed January 26, 2007 because of the intervening events. . . .

18. Gawenda filed a third appeal, DFI & DMRS (GAWENDA III), Case No. 67241, with the Commission on August 28, 2007 of "the termination of her employment, characterized as a 'layoff,' effective August 1, 2007."

Based on the above and foregoing Findings of Fact, the Commission makes and issues the following

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

- 1. Respondents DFI and DMRS, as the moving parties in the motions to dismiss, have the burden to show that both matters should be dismissed.
- 2. Respondent DFI has met that burden as to GAWENDA I, but Respondents have not met that burden as to GAWENDA II.
- 3. As the moving party in the motion for summary judgment in GAWENDA II, Appellant has the burden to establish the absence of any material disputed facts.
 - 4. Appellant has not sustained her burden.

Based on the above and foregoing Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law, the Commission makes and issues the following

ORDER¹

Respondent's motion to dismiss GAWENDA I (No. 65882) is granted. Respondents' motion to dismiss GAWENDA II (No. 66750) is denied. Appellant's motion for summary judgment in GAWENDA II is denied.

Given under our hands and seal at the City of Madison, Wisconsin, this 15th day of April, 2008.

WISCONSIN EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS COMMISSION

Judith Neumann /s/
Judith Neumann, Chair
Paul Gordon /s/
Paul Gordon, Commissioner
Susan J. M. Bauman /s/
Susan J. M. Bauman, Commissioner

¹ Upon issuance of this Order and as it relates to Case No. 65882, the accompanying letter of transmittal will contain the names and addresses of the parties to that case and notices to the parties concerning their rehearing and judicial review rights. The contents of that letter are hereby incorporated by reference as a part of this Order.

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Department of Financial Institutions (Gawenda)

MEMORANDUM ACCOMPANYING ORDER GRANTING MOTION TO DISMISS, IN PART, AND DENYING MOTION FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT

The Appellant, a former employee of Respondent Department of Financial Institutions, has filed three related cases with the Commission. Two of those three pending cases are now before the Commission on motions. Appellant's first appeal, GAWENDA I, relates to her assignment to DATCP in April 2006 and her duties after she returned to DFI in June 2006. She contends that DFI constructively demoted her because her duties in the DATCP assignment were in a classification assigned to a lower pay range than the Communications Officer duties she was performing at DFI. She additionally alleges that when she returned to DFI after two months at DATCP, her new DFI duties were also in a class assigned to a lower pay range than Communications Officer. In her second appeal, GAWENDA II, Appellant contends that her layoff in January 2007 from the half-time Communications Officer position was without just cause.

Given how the two cases relate to each other, the Commission will first address the competing motions in GAWENDA II.

A. Respondents' motion to dismiss GAWENDA II

While the Appellant seeks summary judgment, Respondent has moved to dismiss Appellant's appeal of the January 2007 layoff decision as moot, for the failure to state a claim upon which relief can be granted, and for lack of remedy.

Respondent's motion appears to be premised on the fact that on January 13, Ms. Gawenda chose to demote to a full-time Securities Examiner position at DFI in lieu of lay off from her half-time Communications Officer position. The motion also appears grounded on the fact that her pay rate continued at \$22.854 per hour despite the demotion to Security Examiner and on the fact that there is no longer a position at DFI with the Communications Officer classification.

The Appellant is seeking the following relief in GAWENDA II:

- (A) A determination that the actions of the Respondent in executing the January 26, 2007 layoff of Gail P. Gawenda was without just cause and violates Wis. Stats. Sec. 230.34;
- (B) Reinstatement of Gail P. Gawenda to her position, as Communications Officer, with the Respondent, or, in the alternative, an award of front pay in an amount to be determined after an evidentiary hearing;
- (C) To be made whole for the Respondent's unlawful acts;
- (D) Payment of reasonable attorney fees and costs, pursuant to Wis. Stats. Sec. 227.485;
- (E) Any other relief that the Commission deems just and proper.

When deciding the merits of a State civil service appeal that has been filed pursuant to Sec. 230.44, Stats., the Commission

shall either affirm, modify or reject the action which is the subject of the appeal. If the commission . . . rejects or modifies the action, the commission may issue an enforceable order to remand the matter to the person taking the action for action in accordance with the decision. . . . ²

In Thomas v. UW, Case No. 81-332-PC (Pers. Comm. 3/25/82), the Commission explained the meaning of this language in the context of an appeal of a layoff decision. The employing agency had provided Mr. Thomas with only 14 days notice in advance of his layoff, as opposed the 15 days mandated by administrative rule. The Commission concluded that a complete rejection of the action and full reinstatement of Thomas would be a more extensive remedy than was necessary to address the relatively minor procedural error. Consequently, the effective date of the layoff was modified by delaying it one day. In reaching the decision in Thomas, the Commission offered the following observation: "Had the respondent not – in every substantive way – a proper legal basis for its layoff action, a decision to reject in its entirety the action of the respondent would have been the singular choice available to the Commission."

This language in Thomas indicates that if Ms. Gawenda can show there was a substantive error in her January 2007 layoff, we must reject the Respondents' action and remand the matter "for action in accordance with the decision", i.e. to reinstate the Appellant.³ As a prevailing party, Ms. Gawenda could then seek payment of fees and costs pursuant to Sec. 227.485, Stats. These potential results compel us to deny Respondents' motion to dismiss the appeal for failure to state a claim or for lack of a remedy.

Respondents also contend that GAWENDA II is moot. "An issue is moot when its resolution will have no practical effect on the underlying controversy." STATE EX REL. OLSON V. LITSCHER, 2000 WI APP 61, 233 WIS.2D 685, 608 N.W.2D 425. "In other words, a moot question is one which circumstances have rendered purely academic." ID. Instead of being moot, the question of whether there was just cause for the January 2007 decision to effect Appellant's layoff remains viable and the resolution of that question could have quite significant consequences for both Ms. Gawenda and DFI. If Respondents satisfy their burden

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² Section 230.44(4), Stats.

³ Section 230.43(4), Stats., also provides:

If an employee has been removed . . . from . . . any position . . . in . . . violation of this subchapter, and has been restored to such position or employment by order of the commission . . . the employee shall be entitled to compensation therefore

of proof relative to the layoff, then the Respondents' action will be affirmed and the appeal dismissed. But if the Appellant prevails, the Commission could reject the action and remand the matter, which would have the effect of reinstating her into her former position. Given these circumstances, the dispute between the parties in the layoff appeal is hardly academic.

B. Appellant's motion for summary judgment in GAWENDA II

The Appellant has moved for summary judgment as to Respondents' January 2007 layoff decision.⁴ The standards by which the Commission considers a party's motion for summary judgment in a State civil service appeal are set forth in DOC & DER (SCOTT), DEC. No. 30767 (WERC, 1/04):

The Commission may summarily decide a case when there is no genuine issue as to any material fact and the moving party is entitled to judgment as a matter of law. Balele v. Wis. Pers. Comm., 223 Wis.2D 739, 745-748, 589 N.W.2D 418 (Ct. App. 1998). Generally speaking, the following guidelines apply. The moving party has the burden to establish the absence of any material disputed facts based on the following principles: a) if there are disputed facts, but they would not affect the final determination, they are immaterial and insufficient to defeat the motion; b) inferences to be drawn from the underlying facts contained in the moving party's material should be viewed in the light most favorable to the party opposing the motion; and c) doubts as to the existence of a genuine issue of material fact should be resolved against the party moving for summary judgment. See Grams v. Boss, 97 Wis.2D 332, 338-9, 294 N.W.2D 473 (1980) and Balele v. DOT, Pers. Comn., 00-0044-PC-ER, 10/23/01. The non-moving party may not rest upon mere allegations, mere denials or speculation to dispute a fact properly supported by the moving party's submissions. BALELE, ID., citing MOULAS V. PBC PROD., 213 WIS.2D 406, 410-11, 570 N.W.2D 739(CT. APP. 1997). If the non-moving party has the ultimate burden of proof on the claim in question, that ultimate burden remains with that party in the context of the summary judgment motion. BALELE, ID., citing Transportation Ins. Co. v. Huntziger Const. Co., 179 Wis.2d 281, 290-92, 507 N.W.2D 136 (CT. APP. 1993).

⁴ The Commission typically considers various factors before proceeding to consider the merits of a motion for summary judgment. The factors are set forth in the decision in DOC & DER (SCOTT), DEC. No. 30767 (WERC, 1/04). Because the Appellant is represented by counsel and because the Appellant is the moving party, the factors have little relevance to the present matter.

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The standard to be followed by the Commission when analyzing an appeal of a layoff decision was established in WEAVER V. WIS. PERSONNEL BOARD, 71 WIS.2D 46, 237 N.W.2D 183 (1976):

The circuit judge . . . correctly held that an appointing authority acts with "just cause" in a layoff situation when it demonstrates that it has followed the personnel statutes and administrative standards . . . of the Administrative Code and when the layoff is not the result of arbitrary or capricious action. . . .

We have said that, for administrative action to avoid the label of "capricious or arbitrary," it must have a rational basis. In Olson v. Rothwell, 28 Wis.2D 233, 239, 137 N.W.2D 86 (1965), this court said:

Arbitrary or capricious action on the part of an administrative agency occurs when it can be said that said action is unreasonable or does not have a rational basis. . . . and [is] not the result of the 'winnowing and sifting' process.

The applicable standard was further explained in Newberry & Eft v. DHSS, 82-98, 100-PC (Pers. Comm. 8/17/1983):

[T]he Commission's inquiry in appeals of this nature is relatively limited. If the employer can show that it had a rational basis for its decision, it has satisfied its burden of proof. It is not required to prove that its decision was perforce the best personnel decision that could have been made under the circumstances.

The Appellant bases her summary judgment motion on the theory that the employer failed to comply with certain specific statutory and administrative code provisions as well as on her contention that the decision to eliminate the Communications Officer position was arbitrary and capricious.

Her initial claim is that Respondent DFI did not confer with Respondent Administrator of the Division of Merit Recruitment and Selection as referenced in Sec. 230.34(3), Stats.:

(3) The appointing authority shall confer with the administrator relative to a proposed layoff a reasonable time before the effective date thereof in order to assure compliance with the rules.

She also contends there is no evidence that DFI either submitted a written layoff plan to DMRS or obtained actual approval of that plan as described in Sec. ER-MRS 22.05, Wis. Adm. Code:

Whenever it becomes necessary for an agency to lay off employees, the appointing authority shall prepare a comprehensive written plan for layoff following the procedure specified in this chapter and submitted to the administrator for review and approval prior to implementation.

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The Respondents have supplied an affidavit by the Personnel Director of the Department of Administration stating that the relevant authority of DMRS has been delegated to the Department of Administration (DOA), that DOA had "the responsibility and authority to develop and implement nonrepresented employee layoffs" in DFI, and that DOA in fact "furnished the layoff plan and layoff letter to OSER5 pursuant to s. 230.34(3), Stats." In response, the Appellant argues that DMRS lacks authority for entering into an agreement to delegate its responsibilities and adds that there is no written evidence of a delegation agreement. Even though the Respondent ultimately has the burden of proof to show that it acted in a manner that is consistent with the standard in WEAVER V. WIS. PERSONNEL BOARD, 71 WIS.2D 46, 237 N.W.2D 183 (1976), it is the Appellant who, as the moving party in the motion for summary judgment, must establish the absence of any material disputed facts. The parties appear to have a dispute of fact as to whether a delegation agreement exists between DMRS and the Department of Administration and whether it encompasses the transaction in question. Delegation of authority by the Administrator of DMRS is referenced in Sec. 230.05(2), Stats.:

- (a) Except as provided under par. (b), the administrator may delegate, in writing, any of his or her functions set forth in this subchapter to an appointing authority, within prescribed standards, if the administrator finds that the agency has personnel management capabilities to perform such functions effectively and has indicated its approval and willingness to accept such responsibility by written agreement. If the administrator determines that any agency is not performing such delegated function within prescribed standards, the administrator shall withdraw such delegated function. . . . Any delegatory action taken under this subsection by any appointing authority may be appealed to the commission under s. 230.44(1)(a). The administrator shall be a party in such appeal.
- (b) The administrator is prohibited from delegating any of his or her final responsibility for the monitoring and oversight of the merit recruitment and selection program under this subchapter.

Given this statutory language and the apparent disagreement between the parties as to the existence of a delegation agreement and the effect of such an agreement, we conclude that the Appellant is not entitled to summary judgment on her assertion that Respondents failed to comply with either Sec. 230.34(3), Stats., or Sec. ER-MRS 22.05, Wis. Adm. Code.

We reach the same conclusion as to Gawenda's assertion that because there is no evidence of the required reasoning behind the layoff decision, the elimination of the half-time Communications Officer position was arbitrary and capricious. Respondents have supplied an affidavit prepared by the Administrator of DFI's Division of Administrative Services and Technology. According to the affidavit, while DFI was required to reduce its FTE staffing

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⁵ The Division of Merit Recruitment and Selection is an organizational subunit of the Office of State Employment Relations (OSER).

level by a specified number of positions, the agency retained the discretion to determine how to best effectuate the reduction and it was not required to limit the scope of the layoff to those positions in the agency that were responsible for the functions of information services, procurement, or human resources and payroll benefits. Also, according to the affidavit, management concluded that vis-à-vis other positions in the agency, such as bank or credit union examiner, the Communications Officer position did not perform a "core function" of DFI. In her reply brief, Gawenda argues that there was still no evidence of winnowing and sifting because DFI did not show *how* it reached a conclusion regarding core functions. We anticipate that testimony relevant to the Appellant's most recent argument may be offered at hearing. In any event, we have no basis for concluding that the parties agree there was no reasoning behind DFI's conclusion or that DFI had the discretion to eliminate positions with duties in areas other than information services, procurement, or human resources and payroll benefits.

Because of the existence of disputed material facts, the Appellant's motion for summary judgment must be denied.

C. Respondent's motion to dismiss GAWENDA I

Respondent DFI has also moved to dismiss Gawenda's May 2006 appeal in which she alleges that she was constructively demoted from her Communications Officer position when assigned to perform certain work for DATCP and later when she returned to DFI. A constructive demotion occurs when an employee with permanent status in class is permanently assigned a different set of duties that are best described by a class in a lower pay range *and* where the agency is motivated in doing so by an intent to discipline the employee. DNR (GRUENTZEL I AND II), DEC. No. 32352 (WERC, 2/08), citing DHFS & DMRS (WARREN), DEC. No. 31215-A (WERC, 12/05). "Part of the constructive demotion analysis is to determine the proper civil service classification of the employee's new collection of duties in order to compare it to the class level assigned to the employee's former position." GRUENTZEL, ID. Just as in GAWENDA II, Respondent has moved to dismiss Appellant's 2006 appeal as moot, for the failure to state a claim upon which relief can be granted, and for lack of remedy.

Respondent argues that the matter is moot because Gawenda is no longer working at DATCP, her position at DFI has been eliminated and Gawenda has been laid off. We agree that the work assignments were not permanent and that Appellant's constructive demotion claim has become "purely academic." As we have already noted, the decision in the constructive demotion claim would be based on the duties that Gawenda was permanently assigned to perform while she was at DATCP or upon her return to DFI. She was only at DATCP for two months, from mid-April until mid-June, and she was notified of her revised set of duties upon her return to DFI just two days before she was formally notified that her

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position was "at risk" and had been identified for elimination. She was formally laid off seven months later. Respondent points out that Appellant's June 2006 duties were dictated by a transition that had already been initiated in response to the need to eliminate positions within the agency, and that the changes were not permanent ones. Gawenda is no longer performing the DATCP duties or the June 2007 DFI duties, so it would be very difficult to argue that either set had been permanently assigned. DNR (GRUENTZEL, DEC. No. 32352 (WERC, 2/1008) (duties performed for 7 months were not permanent for purposes of finding a constructive demotion). Even if Appellant is ultimately successful on her layoff claim, there is no reason to believe that she would once again be reassigned to DATCP so that she would return to performing the identical set of duties that were the basis for her original appeal in May 2006. There is also no reason to believe that if successful with her layoff claim, Gawenda would return to the agency to perform precisely the same set of duties for DFI that she had been assigned in June 2006. Given these circumstances, GAWENDA I is moot.

A member of the Commission's staff will contact the parties in Appellant's remaining cases to schedule a prehearing conference.

Dated at Madison, Wisconsin, this 15th day of April, 2008.

WISCONSIN EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS COMMISSION

Judith Neumann /s/	
Judith Neumann, Chair	
Paul Gordon /s/	
Paul Gordon, Commissioner	
Susan J. M. Bauman /s/	
Susan J. M. Bauman, Commissioner	