

# Concurrent Duties of Care: Case et al. v Pattison et al., 2023 ONCA 529

August 21, 2023

The Ontario Court of Appeal released its decision on Aug. 8, 2023, setting aside the **dismissal of the Town of Milton's (the Town) third-party claim against Milton Hydro**. The Court reviewed the proper legal analysis in negligence claims and held that the motions judge **erred in her consideration of whether the Town's alleged negligence constituted** an intervening act that completely broke the chain of causation. The Court remitted the third-party claim for trial alongside the main action, holding that the fact-finding required to determine if Milton Hydro was negligent required a full evidentiary record.

## Background

The plaintiff was catastrophically injured when he was involved in a motor vehicle accident as a pedestrian on Jan. 20, 2015. He and his wife brought a claim against the driver of the vehicle, as well as the Town based on allegedly inadequate street lighting due to a missing streetlight. The Town commenced a third-party claim against Milton Hydro, alleging Milton Hydro had negligently removed the streetlight in question.

## Motions decision

Both Milton Hydro and the Town brought motions for summary judgment. The motion judge could not determine responsibility for the removal of the streetlight on the **evidentiary record before her but was "prepared to assume" that Milton Hydro had removed the streetlight**.

The motions judge held that the central issue was whether Milton Hydro owed a duty of care to the plaintiff or the Town. She held that Milton Hydro did not owe an ongoing duty **of care to either party and that with the Town's intervening annual inspections, the Town could not demonstrate that the accident was reasonably foreseeable at the time the streetlight was removed**. She further held that **the Town's annual inspections, which failed to identify the missing streetlight, broke the chain of causation that may have established liability against Milton Hydro**. The Town appealed.

## Appeal decision

The Court of Appeal determined that the motion judge's legal analysis was flawed and confused the duty of care and causation analyses. The Court held that the necessary fact finding to decide if Milton Hydro owed the plaintiff a duty of care should be determined at trial. Although the claim had to be remitted for trial, the Court nevertheless explored the negligence analysis the motion judge should have conducted in detail.

As a first step, the motion judge had to determine whether Milton Hydro owed a duty of care to the plaintiff. This required considering whether this was a novel duty of care or whether this duty had previously been established by case law. If a novel duty of care, the court had to consider whether there was a sufficiently close relationship between Milton Hydro and the plaintiff such that Milton Hydro could have foreseen that removing the streetlight could have caused harm to the plaintiff. The next step would then be to consider whether any policy considerations existed that could negate the imposition of the duty of care.

Furthermore, Milton Hydro's main argument was that the Town's inspections (or lack of inspections) were an "intervening act" that eliminated any liability on the part of Milton Hydro. The Court emphasized that the issue of an intervening act should be considered as part of the causation analysis. In considering consecutive negligent acts, the motions judge should have considered whether at the time Milton Hydro removed the streetlight it could have anticipated that the Town would fail to inspect this area. Furthermore, **the motions judge should have considered whether the Town's failure to inspect contributed to Milton Hydro's alleged negligence in removing the streetlight, or whether the harm to the plaintiff would have occurred even if Milton Hydro had not removed the streetlight in the first place.**

The Court further held that the time for determining foreseeability is at the time of the allegedly negligent act. In conducting the duty of care analysis, the motion judge should **have considered whether someone in Milton Hydro's position could have foreseen, at the time the streetlight was allegedly removed, the type of harm it caused, i.e., the catastrophic injuries to the plaintiff.**

**The Court concluded that it was an error to assume the Town's alleged statutory duties necessarily meant that Milton Hydro could not also owe a common law duty of care.** Ultimately, the Court determined that the fact-finding required to properly determine the duty of care and causation issues, including who removed the streetlight, would require a full trial of the action on a full evidentiary record. The Court set aside the dismissal of the Town's third-party claim and remitted the matter to trial alongside the main action.

## Key takeaways

A subsequent failure to inspect does not automatically remove liability from the original negligent actor.

In cases where there is a failure to conduct adequate inspections, the party responsible for creating a hazardous condition may be held responsible for doing so. This reaffirms the importance of doing a fulsome investigation and casting a wide net in identifying any relevant parties in a claim.

The passage of time itself does not necessarily determine foreseeability or proximity under the duty of care analysis or the causation and intervening act analysis.

This raises the potential for ongoing exposure to liability in cases where a party has created a hazardous condition that has not been addressed or remedied for a period of time. The Court left open the possibility that a defendant may be unable to rely on the fact that another party has taken over responsibility for maintaining a premises to avoid liability when the defendant itself is responsible for creating the hazard.

There can be concurrent duties of care.

We often see this in the municipal context, but this case is a good reminder that just because a party has statutory obligations, does not mean that another party cannot also be found concurrently liable at common law.

For more information, please reach out to one of the key contacts listed below.

By

[Laura M. Day](#), [Christine Kucey](#)

Expertise

[Disputes](#), [Municipal Liability](#)

---

## BLG | Canada's Law Firm

As the largest, truly full-service Canadian law firm, Borden Ladner Gervais LLP (BLG) delivers practical legal advice for domestic and international clients across more practices and industries than any Canadian firm. With over 725 lawyers, intellectual property agents and other professionals, BLG serves the legal needs of businesses and institutions across Canada and beyond – from M&A and capital markets, to disputes, financing, and trademark & patent registration.

[blg.com](http://blg.com)

## BLG Offices

### Calgary

Centennial Place, East Tower  
520 3rd Avenue S.W.  
Calgary, AB, Canada  
T2P 0R3

T 403.232.9500  
F 403.266.1395

### Ottawa

World Exchange Plaza  
100 Queen Street  
Ottawa, ON, Canada  
K1P 1J9

T 613.237.5160  
F 613.230.8842

### Vancouver

1200 Waterfront Centre  
200 Burrard Street  
Vancouver, BC, Canada  
V7X 1T2

T 604.687.5744  
F 604.687.1415

### Montréal

1000 De La Gauchetière Street West  
Suite 900  
Montréal, QC, Canada  
H3B 5H4

T 514.954.2555  
F 514.879.9015

### Toronto

Bay Adelaide Centre, East Tower  
22 Adelaide Street West  
Toronto, ON, Canada  
M5H 4E3

T 416.367.6000  
F 416.367.6749

The information contained herein is of a general nature and is not intended to constitute legal advice, a complete statement of the law, or an opinion on any subject. No one should act upon it or refrain from acting without a thorough examination of the law after the facts of a specific situation are considered. You are urged to consult your legal adviser in cases of specific questions or concerns. BLG does not warrant or guarantee the accuracy, currency or completeness of this publication. No part of this publication may be reproduced without prior written permission of Borden Ladner Gervais LLP. If this publication was sent to you by BLG and you do not wish to receive further publications from BLG, you may ask to remove your contact information from our mailing lists by emailing [unsubscribe@blg.com](mailto:unsubscribe@blg.com) or manage your subscription preferences at [blg.com/MyPreferences](http://blg.com/MyPreferences). If you feel you have received this message in error please contact [communications@blg.com](mailto:communications@blg.com). BLG's privacy policy for publications may be found at [blg.com/en/privacy](http://blg.com/en/privacy).

© 2024 Borden Ladner Gervais LLP. Borden Ladner Gervais LLP is an Ontario Limited Liability Partnership.