

ENTERED

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

THE DATE OF ENTRY IS
ON THE COURT'S DOCKET
TAWANA C. MARSHALL, CLERK

IN RE:	§	
	§	
ONDOVA LIMITED COMPANY,	§	Case No. 09-34784-SGJ-11
DEBTOR.	§	
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	§	
NETSPHERE, INC., ET AL.,	§	
PLAINTIFFS,	§	
	§	
VS.	§	Civil Action No. 3-09CV0988-F
	§	
JEFFREY BARON, ET AL.,	§	
DEFENDANTS.	§	

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION TO DISTRICT COURT
(JUDGE ROYAL FURGESON):
THAT PETER VOGEL, SPECIAL MASTER, BE
AUTHORIZED AND DIRECTED TO MEDIATE ATTORNEYS FEES ISSUES

The undersigned bankruptcy judge makes this Report and Recommendation to the Honorable Royal Furgeson, who presides over litigation related to the above-referenced bankruptcy case styled *Netsphere v. Baron*, Case # 3-09CV0988-F (the "District Court Litigation"). The purpose of this submission is: (a) to report the status of certain matters pending before the bankruptcy court, that are related to the District Court Litigation; and (b)

to recommend that His Honor appoint Peter Vogel, Special Master in the District Court Litigation, to mediate issues relative to attorneys fees that are further described below.

I. BACKGROUND.

The bankruptcy court has held four status conferences in recent weeks in connection with the above-referenced bankruptcy case (on September 15, 22, and 30, 2010 and October 8, 2010). The bankruptcy court has heard reports and evidence at each status conference regarding the extent to which the so-called "Global Settlement Agreement" has been consummated. The "Global Settlement Agreement" refers to the Mutual Settlement and Release Agreement approved by the bankruptcy court on July 28, 2010 [see Order at Docket No. 394]¹, involving, among other things: (a) dozens of parties, but primarily the Ondova bankruptcy estate (through Chapter 11 Trustee, Daniel Sherman), Jeffrey Baron, the Manilla/NetSphere parties, the Village Trust, the MMSK Trust, and various United States Virgin Island entities; (b) a split of a portfolio of internet domain names; (c) certain payments to the Ondova bankruptcy estate by Manilla/NetSphere and the Village Trust; (d) the settlement of more than a half-dozen lawsuits involving Ondova and/or Jeffrey Baron; and (e) a broad release of claims. While the bankruptcy court has heard positive statements

¹ All docket number references herein refer to the docket entry numbers on the PACER/ECF docket maintained in the *In re Ondova Limited Company* ("Ondova") bankruptcy case (Case No. 09-34784-sgj-11).

from the Chapter 11 Trustee indicating that there has been substantial consummation of the Global Settlement Agreement (i.e., payment of more than one million dollars of settlement funds to the Ondova bankruptcy estate by Manilla/NetSphere; payment of certain additional settlement funds to the Ondova bankruptcy estate from the Village Trust; dismissals of all lawsuits except for the District Court Litigation;² appointment of a successor Trustee and Protector over the Village Trust; steps toward transferring the so-called "Odd Names Portfolio" portion of the internet domain names to a new Registrar away from Ondova), the bankruptcy court has had lingering concerns at each of the status conferences regarding Jeffrey Baron's commitment to completing his obligations under the Global Settlement Agreement, and possibly taking actions to frustrate the Global Settlement Agreement. Part of the bankruptcy court's concerns in this regard have been fueled by the fact that Jeffrey Baron has continued to hire and fire lawyers for himself and certain entities that are parties to the Global Settlement Agreement (e.g., Quantec), and has instructed such lawyers to file pleadings—even after entry into the Global Settlement Agreement—

² The District Court Litigation, as well as the bankruptcy case of Ondova, remain open, so that there will be fora in which the parties can seek relief to enforce or interpret the Global Settlement Agreement. Additionally, there is remaining case administration needed in the Ondova bankruptcy case (namely, resolution and payment of claims—now that there are funds to pay creditors).

as though the matters resolved in the Global Settlement Agreement are far from over.

But the concern over the hiring-and-firing of lawyers is even more problematic than what the bankruptcy court mentions above. The bankruptcy court has had a growing concern that Jeffrey Baron's actions *may be exposing the Ondova bankruptcy estate to possible administrative expense claims* for amounts owed to attorneys that *Jeffrey Baron should pay or entities with which he is connected (Quantec, Village Trust, etc.) should rightfully pay*. To further explain, the court summarizes below some of what has occurred before and after the Global Settlement Agreement was reached.

II. THE CAVALCADE OF ATTORNEYS.

When Jeffrey Baron started hiring and firing lawyers shortly after the Global Settlement Agreement was reached, the bankruptcy court took judicial notice (at a September 15, 2010 status conference) that Jeffrey Baron and Ondova have had *dozens of sets of lawyers* in the past four years, since the litigation with Manilla/NetSphere and other parties commenced. At least the following lawyers have served as former counsel to Ondova and/or Jeffrey Baron in the litigation with Manilla/NetSphere that started in the state district court in Dallas County (before the next phase of litigation between the parties started in the District Court Litigation): (i) Mateer & Schaffer; (ii)

Carrington Coleman Sloman & Blumenthal; (iii) Bickel & Brewer; (iv) The Beckham Group; (v) The Aldous Law Firm; (vi) The Rasansky Law Firm; (vii) Fee Smith Sharp & Vitullo; and (viii) Friedman & Feiger.

Additionally, far more than a dozen attorneys' names were listed in Ondova's Bankruptcy Schedules (Schedule F—the list of pre-bankruptcy unsecured creditors of Ondova) as being owed significant sums of money by Ondova (not the least of which was the Carrington Coleman law firm, that filed a claim for \$224,233.27, and Bickel & Brewer which is scheduled as being owed \$42,500).

Fast forwarding to the post-bankruptcy time period, at least the following lawyers have become engaged by Jeff Baron or entities he directs (or is the ultimate owner/beneficiary of) *since* the Ondova bankruptcy case was filed: (i) Paul Keiffer (Wright, Ginsburg & Brusilow) for Ondova;³ (ii) Gerrit Pronske (Pronske & Patel) for Jeffrey Baron individually;⁴ (iii) Steven

³ Mr. Keiffer and his firm filed an application to be employed by Ondova on July 29, 2009 [Doc. No. 5], which application was granted by this court [Doc. No. 57]. Then, Mr. Keiffer moved to withdraw just a month-and-a-half later, on September 11, 2009 [Doc. No. 83], which the court granted on October 1, 2009 [Doc. No. 108].

⁴ Pronske & Patel moved to withdraw from representing Jeffrey Baron on September 7, 2010, after representing Mr. Baron for many months in the bankruptcy case [Doc. No. 419], citing nonpayment of more than \$200,000 of fees during the Ondova bankruptcy case, conflicts of interest—as Jeffrey Baron has now sued them—and also a concern that Jeffrey Baron may be engaging in fraudulent transfers. This request to withdraw was granted by the bankruptcy court [Doc. No. 449].

Jones for Jeffrey Baron individually;⁵ (iv) Gary Lyon for Jeffrey Baron individually;⁶ (v) Dean Ferguson for Jeffrey Baron individually;⁷ (vi) Martin Thomas for Jeffrey Baron individually;⁸ (vii) Stanley Broome for Jeffrey Baron individually;⁹ and (viii) James Eckles for Quantec.¹⁰ Several

⁵ Mr. Jones made a brief cameo appearance as criminal counsel to Mr. Baron during the Ondova bankruptcy case on September 11 and 28, 2009.

⁶ Attorney Gary Lyon, who has been representing Jeffrey Baron individually for many months in the bankruptcy court and District Court, recently requested to have attorney Martin Thomas substituted in his place or approved as co-counsel with him [see, e.g., Doc. No. 458]. For the first time, Mr. Lyon announced in September 2010 that he is only admitted to practice law in the State of Oklahoma, although admitted in the courts in the Northern District of Texas, and Mr. Lyon felt this was an ethical problem unless he associated with co-counsel (here, suggesting Martin Thomas).

⁷ Dean Ferguson appeared for Jeffrey Baron individually at one hearing in the Ondova bankruptcy case (on September 15, 2010) and said he had been representing Jeffrey Baron for some time in connection with out-of-court negotiations relating to the Ondova bankruptcy case, but he would not be seeking to go forward because of non-payment of fees.

⁸ Attorney Martin Thomas (who has newly filed a notice of appearance in the bankruptcy case) [Doc. No. 37, filed on September 14, 2010] seeks to be primary counsel now to Jeffrey Baron individually. The court signed an order on October 12, 2010 allowing Martin Thomas to represent Mr. Baron (with Gary Lyon) in the bankruptcy case.

⁹ Attorney Stanley Broome (who has newly sued Pronske & Patel for Jeffrey Baron in September 2010) has filed a notice of appearance for Jeffrey Baron in the bankruptcy case [Doc. No. 438, filed September 15, 2010].

¹⁰ Attorney James Eckles filed a notice of appearance for Quantec, LLC on September 21, 2010 [Doc. No. 450]. He has already filed a request that the court interpret part of the Global Settlement Agreement in a way that the court found unsupportable. His request was stricken. It appears to the bankruptcy court that Mr. Eckles is acting primarily for Mr. Baron, individually. He admitted that he had

lawyers have appeared for the Virgin Island entities of which Jeffrey Baron is the beneficiary including (i) Eric Taube (Hohmann, Taube & Summers), (ii) Hitchcock Everitt LLP, (iii) Craig Capua (West & Associates, LLP), and (iv) Shrurig Jete Becket Tackett.

Jeffrey Baron's habit of hiring and then firing lawyers, in many cases after they have incurred significant fees on his or Ondova's behalf (or on behalf of other entities he controls or is beneficiary of), has grown to a level that is more than a little disturbing. As the court noted in court on September 15, 2010, at the very least, it smacks of the possibility of violating Rule 11 (i.e., it suggests a pattern of perhaps being motivated by an improper purpose, such as to harass, cause delay, or needlessly increase the cost of litigation for other parties). Still more troubling is the possibility to the court that Jeffrey Baron may be engaging in the crime of theft of services. See Texas Penal Code §§ 31.01(6) & 31.04 ("A person commits theft of service if, with intent to avoid payment for service that he knows is provided only for compensation: (1) he intentionally or knowingly secures performance of the service by deception, threat, or false token"; "services" includes "professional services"). This crime can be a misdemeanor or a felony—depending on the amount involved. If Jeffrey Baron is constantly engaging lawyers

represented Mr. Baron individually in another matter.

without ever intending to pay them the full amounts that they charge, and then terminating them when they demand payment, this court is troubled that there are possibly criminal implications for Jeffrey Baron.

The bankruptcy court has announced that it will not allow this pattern to occur any further in these proceedings, and Jeffrey Baron will not be allowed to hire any additional attorneys. Mr. Baron has been told that he can either retain Gary Lyon and Martin Thomas through the end of the bankruptcy case (which this court does not expect to last much longer) or he can proceed *pro se*. The bankruptcy court has further warned Mr. Baron that if he chooses to proceed *pro se* and does not cooperate in connection with final consummation of the Global Settlement Agreement, he can expect this court to recommend to His Honor that he appoint a receiver over Mr. Baron, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 754 & 1692, to seize Mr. Baron's assets and perform the obligations of Jeffrey Baron under the Global Settlement Agreement.¹¹

III. RECOMMENDATION.

As alluded to above, the bankruptcy court's concerns over the above hiring and firing of lawyers by Mr. Baron is multi-faceted (e.g., Rule 11 implications; frustration of the Global

¹¹ The bankruptcy court is concerned that it would not have the power to appoint a receiver over Mr. Baron, due to language in section 105(b) of the Bankruptcy Code.

Settlement Agreement; possible criminal theft of services, etc.). But, at this juncture, the bankruptcy court is perhaps most concerned about the risk that the bankruptcy estate has and will be exposed to administrative expense claims as a result of Mr. Baron's behavior (e.g., claims occurring during the post-bankruptcy time period, with regard to which payment may be sought from the Ondova bankruptcy estate, and which claims would "prime" pre-bankruptcy unsecured claims). For example, the Pronske & Patel law firm has taken the position that they are owed and have not been paid approximately \$200,000 incurred representing Mr. Baron. Pronske & Patel may seek a "substantial contribution" administrative expense claim against the Ondova bankruptcy estate (see 11 U.S.C. §503(b)(3)(D) & (4), which contemplate that an administrative expense claim may be allowed for a creditor or professional for a creditor who makes a "substantial contribution" in a case under chapter 9 or 11 of this title). Pronske & Patel have already filed a counterclaim against Mr. Baron in an adversary proceeding Mr. Baron has filed against them. Similarly, certain law firms who have represented the Virgin Island entities of which Jeffrey Baron is the beneficiary (specifically, Hohmann, Taube & Summers, Hitchcock Everitt LLP, West & Associates, LLP, and Shrurig Jete Becket Tackett) have filed a Motion for Allowance of Attorneys Fees Pursuant to the Supplemental Settlement Agreement in the Ondova

bankruptcy case [Doc. No. 452, on September 21, 2010], which represents that they have incurred approximately \$150,000 in fees, after the execution of the Global Settlement Agreement, as a result of status conferences and Show Cause hearings involving Mr. Baron and his entities and that there are specific provisions of certain settlement documents that may permit them to seek a court order allowing these to be paid. If the Ondova bankruptcy estate is imposed with administrative expense claims from these or other attorneys (the risk of which appears to be genuine), then it should be entitled to a claim for reimbursement against Mr. Baron or the entity that incurred the fees. It was because of this risk—and also because of the risk that the bankruptcy court believed it might ultimately find Jeffrey Baron in contempt of the bankruptcy court's order approving the Global Settlement Agreement—that the court ordered on September 16, 2010 [Doc. No. 441] that the Village Trust be instructed by Jeffrey Baron to immediately remit \$330,000 to the Ondova Bankruptcy Trustee as a "security deposit" against these risks. Bankruptcy Trustee Daniel Sherman currently holds this \$330,000 of funds, pending further orders of the court.

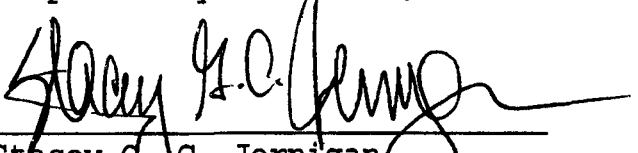
The bankruptcy court now recommends that His Honor appoint his Special Master, Peter Vogel, to conduct a global mediation among Daniel Sherman, Jeffrey Baron, and the various attorneys who may make a claim to this \$330,000 of funds or otherwise may

assert an administrative expense claim against the Ondova bankruptcy estate, in respect of attorneys fees they incurred postpetition for services provided to Jeffrey Baron or entities he controls or is the beneficiary of, and which services may have provided a substantial contribution to the estate. This court has subject matter jurisdiction to make this recommendation, as there could conceivably be an impact on the Ondova bankruptcy estate, if attorneys who represented Jeffrey Baron and his related entities go unpaid and make "substantial contribution" claims against the bankruptcy estate. The bankruptcy court believes that some of these "substantial contribution" claims could be meritorious.

The bankruptcy court has been informed that Mr. Vogel agrees to perform a mediation and that he and Bankruptcy Trustee Sherman are prepared to recommend a format and structure for the mediation and for the participants. The bankruptcy court would defer to Mr. Vogel, Mr. Sherman, and His Honor with regard to the details of the mediation.

Dated: October 12, 2010

Respectfully submitted,



Stacey G. C. Jernigan
United States Bankruptcy Judge