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School operators seek millions in damages

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Claim filed after charges dropped

SANDPOINT -- The operators of a boarding school who were accused of pummeling a runaway student are seeking up to \$8 million in damages against Bonner County and the sheriff's office for negligence and wrongful prosecution.

The operators of Turning Winds, a school for troubled teens which used to be located in Cocolalla, filed the tort claim on Oct. 25.

The filing of the claim comes about 10 months after misdemeanor child endangerment charges were dismissed against John William Baisden Sr., John William Baisden Jr. and Carl Spencer Baisden.

The criminal charges stemmed from a March 17, 2005, incident.

Police reports said the 16-year-old from Walla Walla, Wash., fled school grounds by forcing his way through a fence. The teen made it to U.S. Highway 95 and began hitchhiking as school staff canvassed the area.

A passing motorist reportedly agreed to give the teen a lift. Unbeknownst to the teen, though, was that the motorist was actually John Baisden Sr., who joined the search for the errant student after learning of the escape, police reports said.

The elder Baisden kept the ruse up until they stopped at the Westmond Store, ostensibly for fuel. Baisden's sons then arrived at the filling station and a struggle erupted.

The teen told a sheriff's deputy he was attacked by the trio, dragged from the vehicle and held against the pavement while being handcuffed. The teen alleged he was then dragged by the cuffs to a grassy area near the convenience store and beaten.

The intensity of the fray attracted the attention of four bystanders, all of whom said it appeared as though the teen was on the losing end of an extremely lopsided brawl, reports said.

The Baisdens, however, vigorously disputed the teen's account. They said the teen began hurling punches and death threats, and tried to bite them. They refuted the allegation that he was dragged to the grass and insisted the teen was the one who should be brought up on charges.

The Baisdens defense counsel portrayed the alleged victim as a drug-addled, violent teen with

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a history of threatening to harm himself and others. Included in the court file were excerpts from the teen's journal, which included profanity-laden tirades against his parents and authority, in addition to graphic illustrations of murder and suicide.

"In all, these documents paint a clear picture of the disturbed and violent teenager that the defendants had

to secure to prevent further damage to property and injury to himself and to others on the night in question," defense attorney Clark Peterson said in a court motion seeking to introduce the character evidence at trial.

Bonner County Deputy Prosecutor Sarah Hallock-Jayne later moved to dismiss the charges against the Baisdens because the teen no longer wished to proceed with the case. Hallock-Jayne added in her motion that testifying at trial might be detrimental to the progress the teen has made since the incident.

Judge Debra Heise granted the state's motion in December 2005, records indicate.

In the claim, the Baisdens said the county's actions cost them business, caused them emotional distress and forced them to relocate the school to Montana.

If the county rejects the claim, the Baisdens are free to pursue damages against the county through a civil suit in district court.