

11 USC § 541(a)(1)
11 USC § 558
ORS 18.395(1)
homestead exemption
settlement
specific performance

In re Jacobson
9/28/15

Case No. 11-63542-tmr7
Renn

2015 WL 9956845

In a state court foreclosure suit initiated by their home lender after their Ch. 7 case had closed, Debtors filed a counterclaim for a pre-petition breach of an alleged mortgage modification. They did not seek money damages, but instead sought specific performance. They further asserted the breach as a defense to foreclosure. The counterclaim was not originally scheduled by the Debtors.

The Ch. 7 case was reopened to allow a trustee to administer the counterclaim. The trustee noticed a settlement with the home lender whereby in return for \$10,000, the estate would settle any and all pre-petition claims it had against the lender. Debtors objected to the settlement. They also amended their schedules to list the “defense/counterclaim” and claim it exempt under Oregon’s homestead exemption. The trustee and home lender objected to the claim of exemption.

The Court approved the settlement and sustained the objections to exemption. It rejected Debtors’ argument that the counterclaim was not a “claim” susceptible to settlement because they had not sought monetary damages. It explained that Debtors’ pre-petition rights belonged exclusively to the trustee, and the trustee was not bound by Debtors’ state court pleading. It noted Oregon law allows a party to seek monetary damages in lieu of, or as an alternative to, specific performance. Further, the settlement offer itself was proof Debtors’ pre-petition rights had monetary value.

The Court then distinguished cases authorizing an Oregon homestead exemption in assets other than the home itself, explaining that the counterclaim at bar, even if characterized as one for specific performance, was not “an integral part” of Debtors acquiring their ownership interest. That is, Debtors could own their home without the specific performance claim, and in fact did so for years.

Because the notice of settlement only settled the estate’s “claims,” the Court left open any issues as to whether Debtors’ personal defense were preserved under § 558.

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1 with a claim secured by the property. Early in the case CitiMortgage moved for relief from the automatic
2 stay to allow for foreclosure but subsequently withdrew the motion. On October 19, 2011, an order was
3 entered granting Debtors their discharge and closing the case as “no-asset.”

4 At some point in 2013 CitiMortgage commenced judicial foreclosure proceedings in Polk County
5 Circuit Court. Debtors’ answer contained a “[d]efense and [c]ounterclaim” for “breach of contract,” alleging
6 that in January 2010 (i.e., pre-Chapter 7 petition), they entered into a Home Affordable Modification Trial
7 Period Plan. They allege they complied with all provisions of that agreement (by among other things,
8 making the trial payments), and that CitiMortgage breached it by not offering them a permanent modification
9 agreement. They also allege the foreclosure action itself violated CitiMortgage’s obligations under the
10 Federal Making Home Affordable guidelines, § 3.1.1.¹ Debtors’ prayer did not request any money damages.
11 Rather, it asked for dismissal of the foreclosure action along with an order requiring CitiMortgage to honor
12 the Trial Period Plan agreement and provide a permanent modification agreement. For ease of reference, the
13 Court will refer to this latter request as one for specific performance.

14 At some point the United States Trustee was advised of the Counterclaim, and in January 2015
15 moved to reopen the Chapter 7 case and have a case trustee appointed to potentially administer the asset.
16 The main case was reopened the next day, and Jeanne Huffman was appointed Trustee.

17 On March 3, 2015, Trustee filed the instant motion for authority to settle and compromise:

18 all claims of the Debtors against CitiMortgage, Inc. (collectively, the
19 “Claims”), raised or raisable, that existed as of the petition date in this case,
20 including all such claims or counterclaims raised or raisable by the Debtors in
that certain litigation pending in the Circuit Court for the State of Oregon for
the County of Polk

21 The motion indicates the estate proposes to settle the claims for \$10,000. Debtors objected to the
22 settlement. After a preliminary hearing and at the Court’s direction, they filed Amended Schedule B listing a
23 “Defense/Counterclaim for Breach of Contract against CitiMortgage, Inc.” at an “unknown” value, and
24
25

26 ¹The Defense and Counterclaim does not allege what § 3.1.1 provides or requires.

1 Amended Schedule C exempting the “Defense/Counterclaim” up to \$50,000 under ORS 18.395, the Oregon
2 homestead exemption. Trustee and CitiMortgage subsequently objected to the homestead exemption claim.

3 Discussion:

4 As a preliminary matter, the scope of what is being settled should be clarified. Under 11 U.S.C.
5 § 541(a)(1),² the commencement of the Chapter 7 case created an estate comprised of among other things, all
6 legal or equitable interests of the Debtors in property as of the case’s commencement. There is no dispute
7 that ordinarily claims against third parties, including counterclaims, based on facts arising pre-petition are
8 estate property, In re Endresen, 530 B.R. 856, 864-865 (Bankr. D. Or. 2015),³ and are solely the trustee’s
9 province to administer, whether by litigating or settling them.⁴ Estate of Spirtos v. One San Bernadino Cnty.
10 Superior Court Case Numbered SPR 02111, 443 F.3d 1172, 1174-1175 (9th Cir. 2006). Much is made in the
11 submissions as to whether the claims at bar, and in particular the claim for specific performance, fit within
12 this general rule, in that Debtors did not request money damages in the Circuit Court litigation.

13 First, one must recall Trustee had (and still has) exclusive standing to assert the claims against
14 CitiMortgage and is, thus, not bound by Debtors’ pleading. Nothing prevents her from intervening in the
15 pending litigation and filing her own counterclaim(s) requesting money damages instead of, or as an
16 alternative to, specific performance. Kazlauskas v. Emmert, 248 Or. App. 555, 569, 275 P.3d 171, 179-180
17 (2012). Trustee has short-circuited that process by seeking the instant settlement for \$10,000. That
18 consideration is proof positive the (counter)claim(s) have monetary value and are subject to settlement.⁵

19 _____
20 ²Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent statutory references are to Title 11 of the United States Code.

21 ³This is so even if the debtor in bankruptcy was unaware of his right to bring the counterclaim, as
22 Debtors here have argued. Id. at 864.

23 ⁴As Debtors acknowledged, that proposition remains true in the case at bar, because the potential
24 counterclaim was not initially scheduled and, thus, was not abandoned upon the case’s closure. § 554(c),(d).

25 ⁵This leaves open the question of whether Debtors’ personal defenses are nonetheless preserved.
26 Although under § 558 the estate has “the benefit of any defenses available to the debtor as against any entity
other than the estate,” the caselaw appears to indicate that unlike claims, assertion of defenses is not the

(continued...)

1 In deciding whether to approve a settlement the court looks at four factors as follows:

- 2 1) probability of success on the merits;
- 3 2) difficulties in collection;
- 4 3) complexity of the litigation and expense, inconvenience and delay attending it;
- 5 4) paramount interests of creditors and deference to their reasonable views.

6 Martin v. Kane et. al (In re A & C Props), 784 F.2d 1377, 1381 (9th Cir. 1986). Debtors do not seriously
7 contest, and the Court hereby finds, prongs ##1-3 on balance weigh in favor of approving the proposed
8 settlement. As to prong #4, it is axiomatic that creditors' interests would not be served if the entire
9 settlement sum is exempt, as presently claimed. Therefore, approval of the settlement is inextricably bound
10 with the allowability of Debtors' claim of homestead exemption.

11 Oregon allows an exemption up to \$50,000 for joint debtors in a "homestead." ORS 18.395(1).
12 "The homestead must be the actual abode of and occupied by the owner, or the owner's spouse, parent or
13 child" The exemption has been held to reach property that was not technically the debtor's actual
14 abode. In Sticka v. Casserino (In re Casserino), 379 F.3d 1069 (9th Cir. 2004), the homestead exemption
15 was extended to a security deposit and prepaid rent paid under a month-to-month rental agreement. Giving
16 the statute a liberal interpretation, the court held the prepaid rent and security deposit were conditions
17 precedent to the debtor's right to take possession according to the terms of the lease, and, thus, were "an

18 ⁵(...continued)

19 trustee's exclusive right, and as such a debtor may assert them in his personal capacity. Beach v. Bank of
20 America (In re Beach), 447 B.R. 313, 323 (Bankr. D. Id. 2011) (debtor holds concomitant right to assert
21 personal defenses); In re Larkin, 468 B.R. 431, 435-436 (Bankr. S.D. Fla. 2012) (trustee could not via
22 compromise waive debtor's right to assert personal defenses); see also Lawrence v. Steinfeld Holding B.V.
23 (In re Dominelli), 820 F.2d 313, 318 (9th Cir. 1987) (junior lienor, as representative of the estate, was barred
24 by preclusion principles from reasserting usury defense against senior lienor, when the defense had
25 previously been settled by trustee, yet, if the law allowed, junior lienor "might be able" to assert defense in
26 personal capacity).

27 In this context, it is conceivable the same set of facts comprising the claims being settled may also
28 constitute a defense to foreclosure. The Court need not resolve that issue. Trustee conceded at argument
29 that, as noticed, the estate was only settling "claims," not Debtors' "defenses." The Court, thus, leaves for
30 another day, and perhaps another forum, whether Debtors in their personal right may assert a defense to
31 foreclosure based on the same operative facts as the claims being settled.

1 integral part” of the leasehold, so as to come within the exemption’s scope. Id. at 1074. Here, however, the
2 claims at bar were not conditions precedent to Debtors acquiring their ownership interest, nor are they
3 otherwise “integral” to such interest.


4 Debtors argue the claims being settled encompass the request for specific performance, which if
5 successful would forestall foreclosure and keep them in their home. They seize upon language in Casserino
6 where the court showed concern that should the prepaid rent and security deposit be subject to turnover to
7 the bankruptcy estate, a debtor who could not replace those funds would likely face eviction, which would
8 “completely subvert the homestead exemption’s purpose of allowing the debtor to keep a roof over [his]
9 head.” Id. at 1075 (internal quotation omitted). Debtors’ argument, however, ignores Trustee’s re-
10 characterization of the claims (to which she has sole authority to prosecute) as ones for money damages, not
11 specific performance. Surely a claim for breach of contract seeking money damages would not forestall
12 foreclosure and dispossession. Further, even characterizing the claims being settled as including one for
13 specific performance, the Court would be unwilling to extend the homestead exemption to reach it. Again,
14 such a claim was not integral to Debtors’ ownership interest. That is, Debtors could own the fee without the
15 specific performance claim, and in fact did so for years. Instead, the claim is integral if anything, to Debtors’
16 obligation to repay the loan secured by the property. Cf. Larkin, 468 B.R. at 436 (rejecting a similar claim to
17 the homestead exemption under federal and Florida law). But cf. In re Murphy, 367 B.R. 711, 716-717
18 (Bankr. D. Kan. 2007) (claims against seller and mortgagee based on breach of warranty, revocation of
19 acceptance, deceptive practices, and failure to provide title, all asserted as counter/third party claims in a
20 foreclosure suit, analogized as homestead’s proceeds and included in Kansas’ exemption).⁶ Because Debtors
21 may not exempt the proposed \$10,000 settlement proceeds under Oregon’s homestead exemption, the
22 settlement is in their creditors’ interest, Kane, 784 F.2d at 1381, and thus should be approved.

24
25 ⁶In Murphy, the subject claims arose when the debtors acquired their interest in the homestead, there,
26 a mobile home, instead of years later as here, and further, unlike here, related directly to the mobile home’s
condition and title. Id. Also there, the debtors stated their intention to use the proceeds to repair or replace
the mobile home. Id. at 714.

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Conclusion:

Trustee’s motion will be granted. As a corollary, CitiMortgage’s and Trustee’s objections to exemption will be sustained, and Debtors’ homestead exemption claim disallowed. This Opinion constitutes the Court’s findings of fact and conclusions of law under FRBP 7052. Trustee’s counsel should prepare and upload an appropriate order within 7 days.


THOMAS M. RENN
Bankruptcy Judge