

United States District Court
For the Northern District of California

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

KEVIN MCCONNELL, on behalf of
himself, and all others similarly situated,
and the general public,

No. C 11-3026 WHA

Plaintiff,

v.

**MEMORANDUM OPINION
REGARDING FACTORS TO BE
EVALUATED FOR ANY
PROPOSED CLASS SETTLEMENT**

RED ROBIN INTERNATIONAL, INC.,
a Colorado corporation,

Defendant.

For the guidance of counsel, please keep in mind the following factors that will typically be considered in determining whether to grant preliminary approval to a class settlement:

1. Adequacy of Representation

Is the plaintiff an adequate representative with standing? Is plaintiff motivated to and qualified to act on behalf of those he or she seeks to represent? Are there shortcomings in the plaintiff that would be advanced to defeat a class certification motion? What is the litigation history, criminal history, and relationship to plaintiff’s counsel? In an employment case, how long did the plaintiff work for the employer? The opinion of the lead plaintiff as to the fairness of the settlement to absent class members must be provided to the Court, along with an opinion by counsel. Adequacy of counsel is not a substitute for adequacy of the representative.

If a settlement proposal is made prior to formal class certification, there is a risk that the class claims have been discounted, at least in part, by the risk that class certification will be

1 denied. All counsel should explain whether this risk was discussed and/or considered in the
2 negotiations and, if so, why the rights of non-parties should be prejudiced merely because the
3 particular “representative” (or his or her counsel) might be deemed inadequate or other
4 requirements of Rule 23 might be unsatisfied.

5 2. Due Diligence

6 Has class counsel performed due diligence (discovery and investigation) to learn the
7 strength and best-case dollar amount of the class claim, including preparation of a final expert
8 class damage report? Please remember that when one undertakes to act as a fiduciary on behalf
9 of others (here, the proposed class), one must always perform adequate due diligence before
10 acting.

11 3. Cost-Benefit for Absent Class Members

12 In the proposed settlement, what will absent class members give up versus what will they
13 receive in exchange, *i.e.*, a cost-benefit analysis? If the recovery will be a full recovery, then
14 much less will be required to justify the settlement than for a partial recovery, in which case the
15 discount will have to be justified. This will require an analysis of the specific proof, such as a
16 synopsis of any conflicting evidence on key fact points. It will also require a final class-wide
17 damage study or a very good substitute, in sworn form. If little discovery has been done to see
18 how strong the claim is, it will be hard to justify a discount on the mere generalized theory of
19 “risks of litigation.” A coupon settlement will rarely be approved. Where there are various
20 subgroups within the class, what will be the plan of allocation of the settlement fund and why?

21 4. The Release

22 The release should be limited only to the claims certified for class treatment. Language
23 releasing claims that “could have been brought” is too vague. The specific statutory or common
24 law claims to be released should be spelled out. Class counsel must justify the release as to each
25 claim released, the probability of winning, and its estimated value if fully successful. Does the
26 settlement contemplate that claims of absent class members will be released even for those whose
27 class notice is returned as undeliverable? Usually, the Court will *not* extinguish claims of
28

1 individuals known to have received no notice (and/or for whom there is no way to send them a
2 settlement check).

3 5. Expansion of the Class

4 Typically, defendants vigorously oppose class certification and/or argue for a narrow
5 class. In settling, however, defendants often seek to expand the class, either geographically (*i.e.*,
6 nationwide) or claim-wise (including claims not in the complaint) or person-wise (*e.g.*, multiple
7 new categories). Such expansions will be viewed with suspicion. If an expansion is to occur it
8 must come with an adequate plaintiff and one with standing to represent the add-on scope and
9 with an amended complaint, not to mention due diligence as to the expanded scope. The
10 settlement dollars must be sufficient to cover the old scope plus the new scope. Personal and
11 subject-matter jurisdiction over the new individuals to be compromised by the class judgment
12 must be shown.

13 6. Reversions

14 A settlement that allows for a reversion of settlement funds to the defendant(s) is a red
15 flag, for it runs the risk of an illusory settlement, especially when combined with a requirement to
16 submit claims that may lead to a shortfall in claim submissions.

17 7. Claim Procedure

18 A settlement that imposes a claim procedure rather than cutting checks to class members
19 for the appropriate amount may impose too much of a burden on class members, especially if the
20 claim procedure is onerous, or the period for submitting is too short, or there is a likelihood of
21 class members treating the notice envelope as junk mail. The best approach is to calculate
22 settlement checks from defendant's records (plus due diligence performed by counsel) and to
23 send the checks to the class members along with a notice that cashing the checks will be deemed
24 acceptance of the release and all other terms of the settlement.

25 8. Attorney's Fees

26 To avoid collusive settlements, the Court prefers that all settlements avoid any agreement
27 as to attorney's fees and leave that to the judge. If the defense insists on an overall cap, then the
28 Court will decide how much will go to the class and how much will go to counsel, just as in

1 common fund cases. Please avoid agreement on any division, tentative or otherwise. A
2 settlement whereby the attorney seems likely to obtain funds out of proportion to the benefit
3 conferred on the class must be justified.

4 9. Dwindling or Minimal Assets?

5 If the defendant is broke or nearly so with no prospect of future rehabilitation, a steeper
6 discount may be warranted. This must be proven. Counsel should normally verify a claim of
7 poverty via a sworn record, thoroughly vetted.

8 10. Timing of Proposed Settlement

9 In order to have a better record to evaluate the foregoing considerations, it is better to
10 develop and to present a proposed compromise *after* class certification, after diligent discovery on
11 the merits, and after the damage study has been finalized. On the other hand, there will be some
12 cases in which it will be acceptable to conserve resources and to propose a resolution sooner. For
13 example, if the proposal will provide full recovery (or very close to full recovery) then there is
14 little need for due diligence. The poorer the settlement, the more justification will be needed and
15 that usually translates to *more* discovery and due diligence; otherwise, it is best to let non-parties
16 fend for themselves rather than foist a poor settlement on them. Particularly when counsel
17 proposes to compromise the potential claims of others in a low-percentage recovery, the Court
18 will insist on detailed explanation of why the case has turned so weak, an explanation that usually
19 must flow from discovery and due diligence, not merely generalized “risks of litigation.” Counsel
20 should remember that merely filing a putative class complaint does not authorize them to
21 compromise the rights of absent parties. If counsel believes settlement discussions should
22 precede a class certification, a motion for appointment of interim class counsel must first be
23 made.

24 11. A Right to Opt Out is Not a Cure-All

25 A borderline settlement cannot be justified merely because class members may opt out if
26 they wish. The Court has an independent duty to assess whether it is reasonable and adequate.
27 Once the named parties reach a settlement in a purported class action, they are always solidly in
28 favor of their own proposal. There is no advocate to critique the proposal on behalf of absent

1 class members. That is one reason that Rule 23(e) insists that the district court vet all class
2 settlements.

3 12. Incentive Payments

4 If the proposed settlement by itself is not good enough for the named plaintiff, why should
5 it be good enough for absent class members similarly situated? Class litigation proceeded well
6 for many decades before the advent of requests for “incentive payments,” which too often are
7 simply ways to make a collusive or poor settlement palatable to the named plaintiff. A request for
8 an incentive payment is a red flag.

9 13. Notice to Class Members

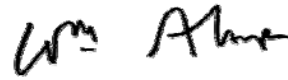
10 Is the notice in plain English, plain Spanish, and/or plain Chinese (or the appropriate
11 language)? Does it plainly lay out the salient points, which are mainly the foregoing points in this
12 memorandum? Will the method of notice distribution really reach every class member? Will it
13 likely be opened or tossed as junk mail? How can the envelope design enhance the chance of
14 opening? Can notice be supplemented by e-mail notice?

15 * * *

16 Finally, for an order denying proposed preliminary approval, *see Kakani v. Oracle Corp.*,
17 No. C 06-06493 WHA, 2007 WL 1793774 (N.D. Cal. June 19, 2007).

18 **IT IS SO ORDERED.**

19
20 Dated: September 29, 2011.



21 WILLIAM ALSUP
22 UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE