

BUSINESS

Newspaper Comics Case Argued In High Court

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For once, the comics are no laughing matter.

Lawyers for The Courant and the Journal Inquirer, rival daily newspapers located barely 10 miles apart, argued before the state Supreme Court Tuesday over whether The Courant must disclose details of its contracts with Sunday comics syndicators.

The Journal Inquirer says it needs the information to determine whether to file an antitrust claim against The Courant over the publication rights to such Sunday comic strips as Garfield, Doonesbury, Peanuts and eight others.

Last May, Hartford Superior Court Judge Vanessa Bryant agreed the information was needed and ordered The Courant to disclose it. But The Courant appealed, leading to Tuesday's hearing before the state's high court. A decision is expected in about two months.

At issue are 11 Sunday comic strips published by The Courant not just on Sundays, but also in a special "Early Sunday" edition that is sold on Saturdays.

The Journal Inquirer has contended that The Courant's contracts with syndicators include special provisions from syndicators allowing The Courant to publish Sunday comics on Saturdays, while denying the same opportu-

nity to the Journal Inquirer.

But only by having those contract details in hand can the Journal Inquirer decide whether to sue The Courant over what may be anti-competitive practices, said Richard P. Weinstein, a lawyer representing the Journal Inquirer.

In seeking such information before actually filing a lawsuit, Weinstein said, the Journal Inquirer was looking "to do the opposite of shooting first and asking questions later."

But lawyer William M. Rubenstein, arguing on behalf of The Courant, told the court that exclusive contracts for newspaper features like comic strips are "commonplace and ubiquitous" and

have been widely held to foster competition, not inhibit it.

Rubenstein said more than 200 Sunday comics are available for use by newspapers. He said it would be anti-competitive for the courts to compel one company to disclose contractual information to a rival in the absence of a pending lawsuit.

The Journal Inquirer regards access to Sunday comics as part of the package of features it would need to draw readers to a Sunday or weekend edition, according to testimony in the case.

The newspaper, which currently publishes Monday through Saturday, has not said that it has firm plans to create a Sunday or weekend edition, however.