

STATE OF MINNESOTA
IN COURT OF APPEALS

A23-1248



In the Matter of the Ronald E. Roehrs Trust
Dated August 9, 1999.

ORDER OPINION

Waseca County District Court
File No. 81-CV-23-104

Considered and decided by Wheelock, Presiding Judge; Slieter, Judge; and Schmidt, Judge.

BASED ON THE FILE, RECORD, AND PROCEEDINGS, AND BECAUSE:

1. Appellant Michael Roehrs appeals from a judgment disposing of all claims in a trust dispute. Michael¹ and his five siblings, respondents Daniel Roehrs, Janet Tharp, and Rhonda Conrath (collectively, “Tharp parties”), respondent Sandra Walstrom, and Steven Roehrs are the beneficiaries of their deceased father Ronald E. Roehrs’s trust. Ronald’s second wife, respondent Marvel B. Roehrs,² served as trustee from the time of Ronald’s death in 2000 until her resignation in June 2023.

¹ Because multiple parties share the same last name, we use first names throughout this opinion when referring to parties individually.

² Respondents Sandra and Marvel are parties to this appeal but did not file briefs.

2. In February 2023, Michael petitioned the district court to (1) remove Marvel as trustee, (2) appoint Steven as successor trustee, (3) order an accounting of trust assets, (4) enjoin the trustee from leasing the trust’s farmland below market rates, and (5) interpret trust language governing the proper use of trust income. The Tharp parties filed an objection, and Sandra and Marvel each filed objections and counterpetitions.

3. In March 2023, Michael moved the district court for preliminary injunctive relief on his requests to remove Marvel as trustee and to appoint Steven as successor trustee. After a hearing, the district court denied the motion for injunctive relief but made neither findings of fact nor conclusions of law to support the denial.

4. In June 2023, the Tharp parties submitted a letter informing the district court that they and Sandra—four of the six beneficiaries—had elected Janet as successor trustee “in the event of [Marvel’s] resignation or death.” Marvel then submitted a letter informing the district court that she resigned as trustee. The Tharp parties submitted another letter requesting an “interim order acknowledging Janet Tharp as Trustee.”

5. Upon the district court’s request, the Tharp parties submitted a proposed order. The proposed order was not designated as “interim.” The district court then issued an order that also was not designated as “interim” and directed entry of judgment. That order included neither findings of fact nor conclusions of law, and the district court did not explain its rulings in any other document or correspondence. Michael now appeals the resulting judgment.

6. Although the order explicitly addresses only the appointment of a successor trustee and is silent as to Michael’s other requests, we are required to construe the entry of

judgment as implicitly rejecting those requests. *See Anderson v. Anderson*, 897 N.W.2d 828, 832 (Minn. App. 2017) (“[G]enerally, a district court’s failure to specifically address or reserve a motion constitutes a denial of that motion.”), *rev. granted* (Minn. Aug. 22, 2017) and *appeal dismissed* (Minn. Jan. 30, 2018); *Palladium Holdings, LLC v. Zuni Mortg. Loan Tr. 2006-OA1*, 775 N.W.2d 168, 177-78 (Minn. App. 2009) (“Appellate courts cannot assume a district court erred by failing to address a motion, and silence on a motion is therefore treated as an implicit denial of the motion.”), *rev. denied* (Minn. Jan. 27, 2010).

7. Michael argues that the district court erred by (1) appointing Janet as successor trustee, because none of the parties named her in their formal pleadings and the district court did not afford Michael notice or an opportunity to be heard on that issue; (2) appointing Janet on a permanent basis, which was beyond the scope of the Tharp parties’ request for an “interim” order; and (3) entering final judgment when Michael’s requests for an accounting, an injunction related to renting the farmland, and interpretation of the trust document’s language had not been litigated and the Tharp parties did not request judgment on those claims.

8. We cannot determine whether the district court’s implicit rejection of Michael’s claims was error because, without findings of fact or conclusions of law, we cannot discern the district court’s reasoning. Generally, findings of fact and conclusions of law are required on all issues tried to the district court, Minn. R. Civ. P. 52.01, to “make definite and certain just what is decided,” *Fredsall v. Minn. State Life Ins. Co.*, 289 N.W. 780, 781 (Minn. 1940). Further, this court’s “ability to engage in effective appellate review

of the exercise of [a district court's] discretion depends on the presence of factual findings and legal analysis.” *State by Swanson v. 3M Co.*, 845 N.W.2d 808, 816 (Minn. 2014); *cf. Hagen v. Schirmers*, 783 N.W.2d 212, 217 (Minn. App. 2010) (stating, in a family-law case, that “the district court must identify both its decision . . . as well as the underlying reason(s) for that decision”). A district court’s findings of fact and conclusions of law enable the “appl[ication of] appropriate standards, permit scrutiny of the decision by the parties, and facilitate meaningful appellate review.” *In re Voluntary Dissolution of Amitad, Inc.*, 400 N.W.2d 828, 831 (Minn. App. 1987); *see Fredsall*, 289 N.W. at 782 (stating that parties and their counsel “are entitled to a decision fully responsive to their sincere contentions” and that neither they nor the appellate courts “should be put to the task of searching the record to determine just which way the [district] court has disposed of any determinative issue”).

9. An appellate court may review a district court’s decision in the absence of findings “where the record is reasonably clear, where the order decides the disputed facts, where the findings are immaterial, or if no findings in favor of the appellant are justified.” *Wakefield v. Anchor Bancorp, Inc.*, 416 N.W.2d 814, 819 (Minn. App. 1987) (quotation and citations omitted). This is not such a case; our ability to review the district court’s actions is inhibited, and remand is required. *See In re Revocable Tr. of Margolis*, 731 N.W.2d 539, 546 (Minn. App. 2007) (remanding a trust matter for consideration of breach-of-fiduciary-duty claims about which the district court failed to make findings or conclusions); *Bettes v. Fuel-Scott*, 415 N.W.2d 409, 411-12 (Minn. App. 1987) (remanding

because the district court entered judgment without explanation and without allowing the record to be developed as to disputed material facts).

10. Because we cannot discern the bases for the district court's rulings, we remand for the district court to make findings and clarify its order. Whether to reopen the record shall be discretionary with the district court.

IT IS HEREBY ORDERED:

1. This matter is remanded for further findings.
2. The district court may exercise its discretion to reopen the record on remand.
3. Pursuant to Minn. R. Civ. App. P. 136.01, subd. 1(c), this order opinion is nonprecedential, except as law of the case, res judicata, or collateral estoppel.

Dated: April 30, 2024

BY THE COURT



Judge Sarah I. Wheelock