

Fulton tax chief reinstates critic's auto tag

A struggle over power and accountability between the Fulton County tax chief and a north Fulton commissioner took another turn Wednesday.

Tax Commissioner Arthur Ferdinand reinstated the auto registration on a 2004 Jeep driven by Commissioner Liz Hausmann's 24-year-old daughter, meaning she can use it again without fear of arrest.

With her daughter out of the fray, the dispute is now between Hausmann and Ferdinand. Hausmann is still suing him for attorney's fees and unspecified damages, citing abuse of power and retaliation. She claims Ferdinand revoked the Jeep's license plate because he was angry at her for calling attention to his own county take-home vehicle — an upscale SUV purchased at taxpayers' expense.

"It is unfortunate that this matter has escalated to the point of a lawsuit," Hausmann said in a written statement, "and I am hopeful that other Fulton County residents will not be subjected to similar undue scrutiny."

Ferdinand did not immediately answer an email Wednesday, and an assistant said he was out of the office. He has not responded to numerous requests for comment from The Atlanta Journal-Constitution during the past month, though he told Channel 2 Action News earlier this month that he was not retaliating against Hausmann, just responding to a tip that she no longer lived in her district.

The two officials will no longer face off in Superior Court on Friday. Hausmann sought a temporary restraining order to force Ferdinand to reinstate the car tag, but her attorney, **Josh Belinfante**, said he backed off when she gave him a document from the county elections office showing her new Johns Creek address.

The chain of events began earlier this month when Hausmann questioned why the county should pay for Ferdinand's commute, considering he's the state's highest-paid elected official with nearly \$350,000 in yearly earnings. Through an open records request, the AJC learned that he dipped into his own department's funds to buy a \$39,000 Ford Explorer Limited.

Ferdinand later circulated a memo suggesting Hausmann may actually live in Gwinnett County, making her ineligible for office. He cited an out-of-date address on both her campaign disclosure forms and on her vehicle registration. The tax on the vehicle, he said, was paid with a check bearing a Gwinnett address.

Hausmann responded that she moved because she is going through a divorce, and with that and her father's recent death she forgot to update her address. Her daughter paid the registration renewal with a check bearing her father's address, Hausmann said.

Saying Hausmann still hadn't proved she lives in Fulton, Ferdinand revoked the Jeep's license plate last week and informed county law enforcement that the car had no valid tag, according to an internal memo.

Checks with other tax commissioners' offices in the metro area found license plate revocations over residency questions to be rare. A spokeswoman for Gwinnett's tax chief said he would not invalidate a registration for that reason.

This isn't the first time Ferdinand has been accused of retaliating against a Northside commissioner who questioned his practices. In 2000, he tried to close two north Fulton restaurants owned by then-Chairman Mike Kenn, claiming Kenn owed \$26,000 in excise taxes for underreporting alcohol sales.

The year before, Kenn had alerted the FBI about a taxpayer's complaint of how Ferdinand's office handled a \$30,000 property tax refund, which mistakenly went to the wrong company out of state.

Ferdinand denied retaliation, saying the audits of Kenn's bars were routine. Kenn sued, then later agreed to pay \$8,000 in beverage taxes to settle the matter.