

Complaint claims state Rep. Vernon Jones doesn't live in his district

A DeKalb County woman has filed a complaint alleging that state Rep. Vernon Jones does not actually live in the legislative district he represents.

Attorneys representing Lithonia resident Faye Coffield, a frequent critic of elected officials from DeKalb County, filed a formal complaint with the state this week. It alleges that Jones lives in Atlanta and should not have been able to qualify to run for re-election in House District 91, which covers the southeastern corner of DeKalb and parts of Rockdale County.

It seeks to have Jones' name removed from ballots for the May 19 primary election.

Jones denied the allegations.

"The complaint is baseless and without merit and my attorney will respond," he wrote in an email to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

In the complaint, Coffield's attorneys alleged that Jones is registered to vote at an address in the city of Stonecrest, which is in District 91, but that he sold his interest in the property in 2001. The complaint claims that a cellphone and a hard line phone associated with Jones have service addresses at a home he purchased last summer on Moreland Avenue in Atlanta.

State law requires that candidates live within the area they're seeking to represent for at least one year prior to an election.

"I have been a Lithonia resident for over 20 years and, as a former police officer, I have a strong interest in effective and ethical government," Coffield said in a statement. "By filing this qualification challenge, I am simply exercising my rights under the law as an elector and resident of the 91st District."

She deferred further comment to her attorneys, which include **Carey Miller**.

Miller said neither he nor Coffield "have an ax to grind."

"It's important to note that the Georgia Constitution and Georgia law require a candidate or a representative to reside within the district that they represent or seek to represent," he said. "Our state has put an emphasis on this, and frankly the requirement of residency has to mean something."

Jones served in the state legislature from 1993 to 2001 before leaving to spend two controversial terms as DeKalb County's chief executive. He then mounted unsuccessful runs for U.S. Senate, U.S. House and DeKalb County sheriff before returning to the state Capitol in 2016.

A Democrat, Jones has been a divisive figure during the DeKalb delegation's ongoing efforts to revise county ethics ordinances. Earlier this month, he drew criticism from the leaders of his own party after a transgender city councilwoman from Doraville went public with claims that he directed transphobic remarks at her.

As things currently stand, Jones would be one of two contenders for the District 91 seat. Conyers resident Rhonda Taylor, a Democrat, signed up to challenge him.

No Republican candidates qualified.

Coffield's complaint will ultimately be heard by a state administrative law judge. Her attorneys have asked for an expedited hearing, though the widespread effects of coronavirus could complicate things.

In light of the pandemic, Georgia Supreme Court Chief Justice Harold Melton has declared a statewide judicial emergency, ordering courts to cease "all but essential" functions.