

Georgia GOP Settles Campaign Libel Lawsuit

The Georgia Republican Party has settled a libel lawsuit over mailers the party financed targeting an attorney running as a Democrat for a suburban Atlanta state House seat.

In a settlement agreement signed Thursday, the state GOP agreed to stop referring to Josh McLaurin—an associate at Krevolin & Horst and a candidate for state House District 51—as being under criminal investigation. The GOP paid for three separate mailers using the language, two of which came after a cease-and-desist letter was sent by McLaurin’s attorney, Stacey Evans, warning the language was libelous.

Evans said she negotiated the settlement with **Richard Robbins**, founding partner of The Robbins Law Group, who represented the GOP.

McLaurin is running against Sandy Springs attorney Alex Kaufman of Kaufman & Forman for the House seat vacated by Republican lawyer Wendell Willard. Willard, the longtime chairman of the state House Judiciary Committee, anointed Kaufman as his successor last spring.

McLaurin announced the settlement on Twitter. “Today, the Georgia Republican Party settled my libel case against it by promising never again to say I’m ‘under criminal investigation.’ I am grateful to @EvansforGeorgia for helping me hold the GOP accountable for its lies. The truth still matters.”

The GOP mailers references to a “criminal investigation” were based on an administrative complaint filed in May with Secretary of State Brian Kemp by **Vincent Russo**, the GOP’s chief deputy general counsel and counsel to Kemp’s Republican gubernatorial campaign. Russo is a partner with The Robbins Law Group and also works with the firm’s new lobbying arm, **RGR**.

An earlier administrative complaint Russo and law partner **David Dove**, Kemp’s former chief of staff and legal counsel, filed on behalf of a former Sandy Springs city councilman to challenge McLaurin’s residency was thrown out in April by an administrative law judge.

In an Oct. 9 letter to the GOP, Evans demanded a retraction in a curative mailer. The party doubled down instead, sending out two more mailers repeating and expanding on the “criminal investigation” claims.

Contending that “false and defamatory statements” about McLaurin were made with actual malice, Evans said the state GOP “crossed the threshold from speech protected by the First Amendment to enter the arena of actionable defamation.”

The GOP didn't acknowledge any wrongdoing in the settlement agreement but promised it will no longer pay, assist or participate in making any political mailers and will issue no media statements attempting to link McLaurin to any criminal investigation. The GOP also agreed it will not sue McLaurin over claims he violated the state's anti-SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) statute when he sued the GOP.

Evans, a former state legislator who lost a bid for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination last summer, said McLaurin and the GOP agreed to settle the case because, "Both sides wanted to be able to put it behind them. I'm glad we were able to get there. The whole time, Josh just wanted the truth. So, that's what we have now."

Evans said that, while the GOP didn't acknowledge the campaign mailers libeled McLaurin, "We stand by our claims and allegations in the complaint that [the mailers were] libelous."

Robbins said the GOP did not admit any fault and paid no money to settle. "I'm glad we were able to resolve it and people can focus on the issues," he added.