

State Judicial Watchdog Has Investigated Municipal Court Council's New Top Officers

The new president of the state Council of Municipal Court Judges was privately reprimanded in 2011 by the Judicial Qualifications Commission, which also has ethics charges pending against the council's newly elected vice president.

The two highest-ranking officers of the Council of Municipal Court Judges of Georgia have been the focus of ethics investigations by the state's judicial watchdog.

The council's new president—Albany Chief Municipal Court Judge Willie Weaver—was privately reprimanded by the state Judicial Qualifications Commission in 2012 after he was charged with striking his wife with a bottle, leaving her with a facial gash that required stitches.

The new vice president—Atlanta Municipal Court Judge JaDawnya Baker—currently faces multiple ethics charges filed by the JQC accusing her of leveraging her judicial office for her own benefit in violation of the state Code of Judicial Conduct. Baker remains on the bench while those charges are adjudicated.

Weaver and Baker were elected to their council offices by the state's magistrate judges in June.

Weaver—who also serves as a municipal court judge in Sylvester, Dawson and Lester—was the chief municipal judge for the cities of Albany and Sylvester when he was charged with aggravated assault in 2011. That charge was based on his wife's statement to several women who found her bleeding and with a blackening eye outside a home where she and her husband were attending a party, according to Albany police reports and a subsequent GBI investigation.

Weaver's wife, Vester Weaver, told those women and police who later interviewed her that her husband assaulted her—a statement supported by her mother, who first notified police, according to police reports and the GBI.

But Vester Weaver later refused to cooperate in a felony prosecution and recanted her accusation at a news conference.

The felony assault charge against Weaver was dismissed in favor of pretrial diversion and the judge's promise to enter marriage and anger management counseling, according to the special prosecutor who handled the case. Weaver took a paid leave of absence from the Albany municipal court bench until the case was resolved. But the Sylvester City Commission allowed him to remain on its bench after he was released on a \$10,000 bond.

Weaver acknowledged Thursday in an email that his wife was injured. But, he said, "It was not by me."

"I do accept responsibility for my relationship being amiss at that time," Weaver said. "I chose the shortest path to resolution, as I wanted to repair our relationship and move forward. I completed everything required of me, including marriage counseling."

"Since that time I have served my constituents every day," Weaver continued, adding that he was elected to several council offices by his fellow municipal court judges, culminating in council president this year, since he was reprimanded by the JQC.

Baker has acknowledged in a formal response to the ethics charges that she "made mistakes" and engaged in inappropriate conduct. When Baker was appointed in 2015, she was the youngest judge on the Atlanta Municipal Court bench.

Baker suggested the possibility of a formal reprimand in her response, while insisting the charges "do not reflect any major transgressions" that would warrant suspension or removal from the bench.

The judge referred questions to her new counsel, **Richard Robbins** and **Joshua Belinfante** of Atlanta's **The Robbins Firm**.

"Judge Baker has long been committed to the community," Robbins said Thursday. "She believes that the formal charges are inappropriate, and she has no intention of shrinking away from what she believes to be important community service, including service on the council, because of charges that should never have been brought or resolved early."

"She is a very dynamic judge and very dynamic in the community," Robbins continued. "Why should she hide in her room because charges have been brought against her? She believes she will be fully exonerated, even though, at all times, she has been willing to agree to a reasonable resolution."

"I believe this is a classic reprimand case," he said. "She acknowledges she made mistakes. She had growing pains as a judge." But he concluded, "I believe she is a valuable member of the judiciary."

The JQC contends that Baker used court security and other staff to run personal errands, improperly dismissed cases presented to her for guilty pleas, interfered with plea negotiations, attempted to bar certain prosecutors from being assigned to her court, threatened to fire court employees, and belittled and humiliated her staff. The charges also contend that she made "untruthful, evasive and misleading statements" to the JQC.

Baker contends the ethics complaint was filed "by a disgruntled former employee" and contained "many allegations which were not true."

In her response, Baker said she met with the JQC before it issued the charges and told the commission's investigative panel that, after counseling with fellow judges, she realized some of her actions were misinterpreted and others were mistakes, including mixing personal and business tasks with staff she considered friends.

She defended her criticism of some employees, saying they repeatedly made mistakes that resulted in unwarranted arrest warrants and license suspensions, or disseminated confidential information.

Baker, a former Fulton County prosecutor, acknowledged having "differences of opinions" with prosecutors and that she had made clear that certain prosecutors were no longer welcome in her court.