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U.S.

Ethics Chief in Georgia Wins Suit Over Ouster

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ATLANTA — Jurors have awarded the former director of Georgia’s ethics commission \$700,000 after ruling in her favor in a lawsuit in which she said her salary had been cut and a deputy removed for investigating complaints against Gov. Nathan Deal.

The jury ruled on Friday in favor of the former official, Stacey Kalberman, after more than two hours of deliberations. The jurors also decided that Ms. Kalberman would receive lawyers’ fees and back pay.

“I’m relieved. I’ve honestly and truly believed what happened to me was wrong,” Ms. Kalberman said after the verdict.

Ms. Kalberman claimed in her suit against the commission and its current director that commissioners had slashed her salary and eliminated her deputy’s post after the two sought approval to issue subpoenas as part of the agency’s investigation into Mr. Deal’s 2010 campaign reports and financial disclosures.

The state argued that the personnel actions were motivated by budget concerns.

Mr. Deal, a Republican, was later cleared of major violations in the ethics inquiry and agreed to pay \$3,350 in administrative fees. His political opponents seized on Friday’s verdict to raise questions about Mr. Deal as he seeks re-election this year.

Brian Robinson, a spokesman for the governor, said that the ethics commission operated independently of elected officials and that the

lawsuit involved “an internal dispute between former employees and former commissioners.”

Separately, the attorney general’s office declined to comment, citing other pending lawsuits filed by Ms. Kalberman’s former deputy, Sherilyn Streicker, and a former information technology specialist for the commission.

Ms. Kalberman’s lawyers argued throughout the trial that the commissioners began moving to push their client out after a May 3, 2011, commission meeting because she had presented them with draft subpoenas in the Deal investigation. Ms. Kalberman was told during a meeting just over a month later that her salary would be cut by about a third and her deputy’s position eliminated, jurors heard.

Assistant Attorney General Bryan Webb argued that dire budget problems facing the agency were the motivation behind the personnel actions.

Former commissioners who testified at the trial said they were concerned about the agency’s budget after the May 2011 meeting and were taken aback when Ms. Kalberman asked for a raise for herself and some members of her staff in the executive session that followed it.

Holly LaBerge, who succeeded Ms. Kalberman as director of the commission, testified that she was contacted by someone in the governor’s office in mid-May 2011 asking if she would be interested in the commission director job and was later contacted by commissioners. All of that happened before Ms. Kalberman had been told about her salary cut and before the job was publicly posted.