COOK COUNTY BOARD OF REVIEW: CALABRESE SETTLES FOR $180K IN WRONGFUL TERMINATION LAWSUIT

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FULL TEXT

The Cook County Board awarded $180,000 Thursday to a former county employee who sued Board of Review Commissioner Samantha Steele for wrongful termination.

The county's top watchdog, meanwhile, dinged Board of Review members for ignoring its own rules when hiring new staff, many of whom he found were politically connected to the commissioners.

Frank Calabrese, a former assessment analyst and communications director for Steele, sued in federal court back in July. He claimed Steele fired him after he refused orders to release details about the Chicago Bears' then-pending property tax appeal for their Arlington Heights property. His suit claimed she wanted him to politically damage fellow commissioners on the board Steele had been feuding with. He alleged his cooperation with the Cook County Office of the Independent Inspector General also played a part in his firing.

Steele is one of the three Democrats to serve on the quasi-judicial panel that adjudicates property tax appeals. She declined to comment on the settlement on Wednesday, but flatly denied the allegations to the Tribune when Calabrese's suit was filed this summer, saying its claims were "completely false."

The county's inspector general did fault Steele for her handling of the Bears' appeal in October, saying under Board of Review policy, Steele should not have disclosed "confidential information" to the media regarding it. He recommended she take ethics training.

In a letter submitted to the county board's Finance Committee this week, Calabrese wrote that "all I wanted was back pay and my job back," but that he ultimately accepted the settlement "because a previous employer reached out with a job opportunity" and he had "received a degree of justice" when a video from Steele's DUI arrest was released.

Calabrese requested the video from the Chicago Police Department and released it to news outlets in November. That video showed Steele initially rebuffing requests to get out of the car and take a field sobriety test, which she later did. According to the arrest report, Steele repeatedly asked one of the officers "Is your penis that small?"

Video footage of that alleged exchange is not available because body-worn cameras are turned off in hospitals.

In his letter, Calabrese said if the public could see her treatment of officers at the scene, "then it is not hard for people to believe how she mistreated me as an employee."

Scott Britton, head of the subcommittee that considers such settlements, voted 'present.' An attorney, Britton advised Steele on the night of her arrest, but not afterwards. Her new attorney successfully argued that Steele should keep her driver's license in court last month. Her next court date is in February.

IG: Board hiring lacks guidelines

Inspector General Tirrell Paxton issued a separate report Wednesday finding the Board of Review ignored its own hiring plan when it brought on 20 new staffers following the inauguration of Steele and fellow Commissioner George Cardenas in late 2022.

The investigation, covering the first four months after Steele and Cardenas were sworn in, "revealed that none of the 20 new employees hired by the BOR to fill openings ... were hired in accordance with the BOR's Employment Plan," the latest quarterly report from Paxton's office said. Applicants weren't compared against each other, weren't picked by consensus and "their qualifications were considered on an individual basis."

The board only had records for seven out of the 20 new hires, the investigation found, and most managers involved in hiring

"knew nothing about" the rules in the employment plan, even though many had attended the board meeting where the rules passed or were emailed drafts of it.

The investigation also found widespread hiring based on political affiliation, a violation of the board's personnel rules. Though the report did not identify commissioners by name, it said "Commissioner A" worked for the city for 20 years, which was only true of Cardenas.

One of Cardenas' newly hired employees told the IG he had worked on Cardenas' 2022 campaign and when he was alderman.

Another new hire that others said previously worked for Cardenas "for years" was asked by IG staff his qualifications to be an assessment analyst. He said, "'I know how to do the computer,' but was unable to name any computer applications, including the system used by BOR analysts in their daily work. He was also unable to describe basic BOR processes," the report said.

Seven of 10 new hires were politically connected to "Commissioner B," and often did not compete with others for their spots, the report found. The details of the hiring and campaign timelines match Steele's, who also took office in 2022. Many of her new hires helped on her campaign or were donors.

Paxton's office made 11 recommendations to reform hiring, including asking the office to repost all 20 positions for hire and have those employees compete with other applicants. It should also adopt a hiring platform like Taleo instead of accepting applications via email.

The Board of Review has not yet responded to those recommendations.

CAPTION: Photo: Cook County Board of Review Commissioner Samantha Steele enters the Daley Center on Dec. 27 for her initial court appearance for her DUI arrest. Frank Calabrese, a former assessment analyst and communications director for Steele, her for wrongful termination last year. Tess Crowley/Chicago Tribune

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