

StarTribune

Jury says Minnesota sheriff did not fire two deputies in retaliation

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Star Tribune

May 3, 2013 - 8:09 PM

A federal jury on Friday rejected claims that Ramsey County Sheriff Matt Bostrom had two probationary deputies fired in retaliation for working on the re-election campaign of predecessor Bob Fletcher.

Joseph Miller, 30, and Alexander Graham, 26, had been hired by Fletcher after the 16-year incumbent lost the November 2010 election to Bostrom, but then were terminated in February 2011 after Bostrom took office and additional background checks were conducted on them.

They sued Bostrom in U.S. District Court, alleging that they'd been dismissed for political reasons.

After the jury's verdict was read, Bostrom deferred comment to his attorney, Charles Nauen, who said: "We're pleased ... now it's time to move on."

In closing arguments, Nauen told jurors that Bostrom was not personally involved in the decision to fire the men, having delegated personnel matters to his chief deputy, and that the background checks were essential to ensure law enforcement officers have the character and proper attitude to serve.

"You can't hold up politics as a shield if you're unsuitable for the job," Nauen said.

He noted, too, that Bostrom had retained several administrators who had been appointed by Fletcher.

Mark Gehan, an attorney for Miller and Graham, alleged that Bostrom worked behind the scenes with Commander Brad Camitsch to ensure that the background reports compiled by Sgt. Erik Lorfald would have the "smoking guns" needed to prompt the men's dismissals by Chief Deputy John Kirkwood.

To rebut Bostrom's claim that he didn't have a hand in personnel matters, Gehan noted that Bostrom had written an e-mail about another Fletcher supporter after taking office and then followed it up with a 24-minute phone call verified by cellphone records.

He said that Miller and Graham were "singled out" from a group of probationary employees and that as a result of the firings, their hopes for law-enforcement careers had ended.

According to the background checks, Miller had been arrested for two bar fights, but not convicted in either case, and failed

two previous psychological evaluations in Ramsey County. Graham, who previously worked temporarily in the Ramsey County jail, was described by supervisors as lacking professionalism while in that role. He also was accused of intentionally riling up inmates.

Miller and Graham did not, however, have any performance or disciplinary issues during their five weeks as sworn deputies.

On Thursday, Fletcher testified that it was common practice to allow probationary employees with no major performance issues to resign instead of firing them, thereby protecting future employment prospects.

Miller, who attended closing arguments, was not in attendance when Friday's verdict was read. Graham declined to comment.

Staff writer Chao Xiong contributed to this report. Anthony Lonetree • 651-925-5036

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