

'I's here' roll-call reply judged not malicious

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Two members of the Louisiana Auctioneers Licensing Board did not act maliciously toward a former board member, who is black, by answering the roll call “I’s here” and “I’s here, too,” according to a report from the Office of the State Inspector General.

The former board member, the Rev. Freddie Phillips, filed a complaint in December, the report says. Phillips alleged that at the board’s Nov. 5 meeting, board Vice Chairman James Sims and board member Gregory Bordelon answered the roll the way they did to intentionally offend Phillips.

“However, our investigation found no evidence to support the allegation of malicious intent directed at Rev. Phillips or anyone else,” Inspector General Stephen Street said in a Feb. 22 letter to Gov. Bobby Jindal.

Sims told investigators he is a diabetic and has dentures, which sometimes cause him to speak unclearly, Street said in the letter.

“He (Sims) stated ‘Sometimes things come out wrong,’ ” the report says.

Sims also repeatedly used “I’s” during the interview and it appeared to be “an unintentional part of his dialect,” the letter says.

Bordelon had denied saying “I’s here, too,” in an interview with The Advocate.

In his letter, Street said Sims’ and Bordelon’s responses are clear in the audio recording of the meeting.

And under questioning by the Inspector General’s Office, Bordelon said he intentionally answered “I’s here, too” during the roll call because he was responding to Sims’ reply, Street said in the letter.

Bordelon described Sims as a “north Louisiana redneck,” the letter says. And Bordelon described saying “I’s here, too” as “a friendly mocking” of Sims’ speech.

Phillips rejected the explanations for the responses and the report’s conclusions.

Phillips said he has missed only one Auctioneers Board meeting in the last four years, the Nov. 5 meeting. In all that time, Phillips said, Sims never used the phrase “I’s here.”

More recently, Phillips and former Louisiana Auctioneers Licensing Board board member Robert Burns filed a lawsuit Wednesday in 19th Judicial District Court asking that the board, Sims, Bordelon and board chair Tessa Steinkamp pay damages for violating the state’s Open Meetings Law.

The lawsuit says Sims, Bordelon and Steinkamp refused to let Phillips and Burns, members of the public, speak on agenda items at the board’s Jan. 8 meeting, a meeting in which the Nov. 5 minutes were on the agenda for ratification.

Phillips asked to speak about the minutes of the Nov. 5 meeting, which Phillips said should show Sims’ and Bordelon’s exact responses to the roll call, the lawsuit says.

However, at the January meeting, board attorney Larry Bankston said Phillips would not be allowed to comment on the content of the minutes, according to the lawsuit.

The lawsuit says Burns also was denied the opportunity to comment on an agenda item.

The lawsuit says the state’s Open Meetings law requires public bodies to allow the public to comment on any agenda item requiring a vote.

Bankston said Thursday he could not comment on the lawsuit because he hadn’t seen it.

Meanwhile, in his letter to the governor, Street said interviews with other board members revealed that no one present found the comments offensive.

Board members also said no members of the public attended the meeting, which board members described as loose and relaxed, Street said in the letter.

The laughter heard on the recording after Bordelon’s response was a reaction to Bordelon repeating Sims’ response, Street said in the letter. All the board members said the roll call replies were not intended to offend Phillips.

“Given the above, we are closing our file and taking no further action in this matter,” Street said in the letter.