

Ex-prosecutor booted from Harris County judicial race following concerns over threat to judge, signatures

By [Nicole Hensley](#), Staff Writer

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Harris County Civil Courthouse, 201 Caroline Street, is photographed in Houston, Wednesday, March 5, 2025.

Yi-Chin Lee/Houston Chronicle

A judge removed a Houston lawyer from the Democratic race against Judge Lauren Reeder following a contentious hearing that brought the challenger to court to defend both her ballot signatures and a text message. The message in question appeared to threaten the incumbent with exposing a past romantic relationship if she didn't drop out of the race, according to testimony.

The decision late Thursday to disqualify Kim McTorry, a former Harris County prosecutor and associate judge, from the race for the 234th District Court judge seat came just ahead of a looming deadline for officials to print and mail the March primary ballots to overseas voters. Both sides waited more than two hours on opposite ends of the courthouse for her ruling, only to be told to expect an email with the decision.

A witness testified that McTorry understood a text message she sent Reeder "was bad" and that her intent was to intimidate the incumbent, Judge Christi Kennedy wrote in a seven-page ruling. Kennedy determined McTorry's testimony was not credible and suggested that she may have coordinated with a political activist to share social media videos threatening to expose Reeder's affair with an attorney.

The judge noted McTorry can challenge her decision with a March 2 trial, the day before the primary election.

The bulk of testimony in the temporary restraining order hearing focused on how an apparent misunderstanding led to an escalating political feud and frayed friendships, rather than similarly dwelling on 42 potentially fraudulent signatures. The Harris County Democratic Party chair rejected Reeder's complaint about the signatures, triggering the hearing on Wednesday and Thursday.

Reeder's attorney, Lloyd Kelley, argued McTorry attempted to extort his client — a violation of election code. McTorry alleged Reeder violated the same code by attempting to bribe her after she entered the March 3 primary race for Reeder's bench in December.

Kennedy gave both sides until 4 p.m. to question an array of witnesses during the hearing. She cut off McTorry's attorney, Trinidad Zamora, when he exceeded the allotted time.

"You have done nothing but kind of stall and bumble around during your examination," Kennedy said as she rejected a slew of Zamora's last-ditch objections.

Reeder will face off with her Republican opponent in November.

McTorry did not respond to an earlier request for comment.

Reeder's legal filings aimed at ending McTorry's candidacy included allegations that she entered the race with a fraudulent petition — as other candidates were accused of this month before dropping out — before shifting to claims that McTorry tried to extort her into abandoning her campaign.

Reeder received a Jan. 8 text message from McTorry demanding her withdrawal from the race by noon the next day so she could finish her term "strong and blemish-free," court filings show.

The message accompanied screenshots from the Ahmad, Zavitsanos & Mensing law firm and a list of about a half dozen civil cases assigned to her court and linked to an attorney from that company who seldom appeared on those cases, according to testimony.

Reeder interpreted the screenshots as referencing a past relationship she had with the attorney. She believed McTorry planned to expose the relationship as a potential conflict if she did not drop out of the race. She did not withdraw from the race and testified those cases did not merit her recusal, she said.

About an hour after McTorry's imposed deadline, a Democratic activist, Kandice Webber, posted videos to Facebook about Reeder's family, including her children, that threatened to expose her affair. The videos prompted Reeder and her staff to file police reports, the judge testified Thursday.

Reeder believes McTorry and the activist worked in concert — an assertion McTorry denied in her testimony.

McTorry's testimony touched on her sentiment that she believes white Houston judges are more likely to challenge their Black contenders, as what happened to her, although she did not identify a source of that belief. She referred to Webber's social media posts showcasing that conspiracy to keep candidates like her off the ballot.

Webber did not respond to a request for comment.

The hearing brought two more former prosecutors from McTorry and Reeder's orbits to the witness stand to explain their perspectives on the escalating political battle.

Chauntelle Wood White, a friend who worked with McTorry and Reeder at the Harris County District Attorney's Office and who acted as a go-between for the women, testified the messages followed an email McTorry received that someone she believed was linked to Reeder had requested her personnel file from her time as prosecutor.

McTorry feared the file also contained intel about her own past affair with a colleague that Reeder could use against her during the campaign.

She asked Wood White to pass along a message to Reeder.

"Kim said, 'You can tell her if she comes for my family — I'm coming for hers,'" Wood White testified, adding that she relayed that message to Reeder.

The other attorney, Michael Harrison, testified Wood White felt conflicted as she attempted to manage her friendships as it became clear both women would face each other in the primary.

McTorry fired back at Reeder's election challenge with an allegation that she conspired with another elected official, Judge Beau Miller, to bribe her with a \$50,000 campaign donation from the Arnold & Itkins law firm to run against a different incumbent judge. She told Wood White she was poised to file a complaint with the State Commission on Judicial Conduct about the perceived bribe.

Wood White recalled telling McTorry during a phone call Monday that she was mistaken — there was no bribe and Miller was in no way involved, according to testimony.

She attributed the misunderstanding to a conversation with McTorry where she explained having learned during a Dec. 4 lunch with Reeder and Harrison that members of the Arnold & Itkin law firm were already considering supporting Reeder financially. Wood White explained to McTorry that she could still be considered for a similar donation if she ran for a different court as firms were unlikely to give money to opposing candidates.

Reeder ultimately received a combined \$15,000 in campaign donations from three of the firm's members in December, according to campaign contribution records filed Thursday. She had more than \$145,448 in campaign contributions, records show.

McTorry, whose campaign finance report was not available, insisted the bribe happened and she would prove it with Wood White's testimony, she continued.

"I'm not testifying to what you just said because that's not what happened," Wood White told her.

Harrison, who attended the lunch and witnessed Wood White's attempt to talk McTorry down, attempted to distance himself from the dispute during the hearing. He deemed it political in nature, according to testimony.

"What politics is in 2026, I don't approve of, and how ugly and how personal it can become," Harrison said. "I'm talking about nationally and all the way down to this room."

He reviewed McTorry's text message to Reeder and viewed it as a threat but stopped short of calling it a criminal action.

"It seemed like an open door to more attacks," Harrison said.

The district attorney's office did not respond to an inquiry on whether they had fielded complaints about McTorry's conduct.

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