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## South Gate officers win suit

By Stuart Silverstein

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Four minority South Gate police officers who claimed they were harassed on the job because of their ties to two controversial and eventually ousted Latino city officials won a \$10.4-million jury award Thursday.

The award is believed to be one of the largest ever in a police employment discrimination case and represents another setback for the controversy-plagued, working-class community in southeastern Los Angeles County.

The officers said they were threatened and undermined in trying to carry out their duties by some supervisors, most of whom were white, and by other officers. The plaintiffs said the illegal harassment was linked to their association with Rick Lopez – a previous acting police chief and the first Latino to head the department – as well as with since-disgraced former city Treasurer Albert Robles.

Bradley C. Gage, a lawyer for the four plaintiffs – three of whom still work for the South Gate Police Department – said the jury award “proves exactly what we have said all along, that this is a police department that’s out of control.”

Gage added that his clients and other officers on the force “have been subjected to discrimination, harassment and retaliation. Until the city changes its leadership, there’s a big risk of additional problems happening.”

But representatives of South Gate countered that the officers’ allegations mainly dated from 2002-03, when the city was roiled by a recall election campaign. They said the Police Department’s employment practices have since been revamped, leading to more hiring and promotions of minorities.

John B. Golper, a lawyer for the city, said he expects to file follow-up motions or an appeal challenging the award by the Los Angeles Superior Court jury.

“I honestly think this was a confused jury,” said Golper, who called the sum “very large and very surprising.”

The case evoked memories of past South Gate controversies that led to the ouster of Robles and three of his City Council allies in a January 2003 recall election. More recently, in November, the former city treasurer was sentenced to 10 years in federal prison for plundering more than \$20 million from city coffers.

Lopez was ousted as acting police chief shortly after the recall election. The departure came amid complaints about his \$120,000 annual salary and other compensation, along with allegations – which Lopez denied – that he broke the law by campaigning against the recall while in uniform. He was never charged.

The biggest part of the jury award, more than \$4 million, went to Officer Albert Carrillo, a brother-in-law of Robles. Gage said Carrillo’s life has been endangered because other officers have turned down his emergency calls for backup help.

The lawsuit, brought in 2005, also charged that anti-Lopez members of the Police Department targeted the plaintiffs and other officers by posting a threatening, one-page leaflet around department headquarters called the "South Gate Resister."

Among other things, the document said officers who sided with Lopez should "look over your shoulder. Until you leave this organization, you never know what can happen in this violent world in which we live." In addition, the document said, "Here's our deal. We know who you are. We will deal with you when we finish taking out the most putrid of trash first."

The issue of ethnicity appeared to enter the jury's decision only indirectly.

The jury found that none of the plaintiffs – current Officers Carrillo, Ron Corbet and David Matsukiyo and former Officer Troy Hernandez – was subjected to harassment or discrimination because of his race.

But the panel did find that they were harassed and discriminated against because of the race or national origin of people the officers were associated with, a reference to their ties to Robles and Lopez.

This is the second multimillion-dollar jury award Gage has won against the city of South Gate.

Last year, a jury awarded his client, a former assistant police chief, \$4.2 million in a lawsuit claiming retaliation. The city is challenging that decision.

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