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Cudahy arrests add salt to L.A. County area's civic wounds

Some observers see a merger of small southeast L.A. County communities as a way to combat endemic political corruption.

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Cudahy City Councilman Osvaldo Conde surrenders to the FBI after a long standoff at a jewelry store. (Irfan Khan, Los Angeles Times / June 24, 2012)



Federal agents arrest 3 in Cudahy bribery case

By Hector Becerra and Sam Allen, Los Angeles Times

June 24, 2012

Just two years ago, a City Hall scandal in Bell touched off a round of community anger amid the working-class cities that hug the 710 Freeway in southeast Los Angeles County. Finally, local activists thought, their elected representatives would straighten up, knowing that their actions were being

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scrutinized and that government malfeasance could mean they would go to jail.

It hasn't quite worked out that way.

On Friday, three city officials in Cudahy were arrested on bribery charges — related to crimes that allegedly occurred this year. The federal investigation is ongoing and includes election fraud and other corruption allegations.

Once again, residents in the area are asking themselves what it is about their communities that makes them fertile ground for graft.

For nearly three decades, corruption has been endemic in the area. A South Gate treasurer looted \$20 million from the city. A former Lynwood mayor collected \$6 million in a contracting scheme. Other Lynwood council members used city credit cards at strip clubs. And, of course, Bell City Administrator Robert Rizzo and seven others there treated themselves to hefty compensation packages in a case that Dist. Atty. Steve Cooley called "corruption on steroids."

Southeast L.A. County has long been a place where political engagement is often low and temptation is high. The dozen or so cities that make up the region are small and poor. Most of the residents are Latino immigrants who work hard and have little involvement in traditional civic life.

Only a small fraction of the residents actually vote — turnouts of less than 10% are not uncommon — making it easy for political blocs to gain power by collecting just a few hundred votes. There are relatively few newspapers or community associations that monitor city halls or the network of school districts and special districts.

The Bell scandal in 2010 did spark some renewed scrutiny. City Council meetings in the region began to attract residents. The salary scandal prompted many cities to vow greater transparency, particularly in how officials are compensated. The public attention eventually receded, but the problems have not. State or federal probes are underway in Bell, Maywood, Vernon and two local water districts.

Some believe the only way to stem the tide of corruption is to merge the various cities into one much-larger government that can be better policed.

"Instead of 40 council members, you [should] have seven. Instead of six city managers, you have one. Instead of six police chiefs you have one — and there are more voters to pay attention," said Rick Cole, an urban planner and the city manager of Ventura. "One person ... isn't going to be able to seize control of a city of that size, complexity and sophistication."

Those who have battled to reform southeast L.A. County politics said the culture of graft runs deep.

Longtime South Gate Councilman Henry Gonzalez said he always remembered what Albert Robles, an ex-treasurer who bilked and almost bankrupted the city, told him.

"Robles said, 'You don't go to jail for stealing. You go to jail for getting caught. And I'm too smart to get caught,'" Gonzalez said. "The problem with the system is power turns to greed."

Just before Robles was sentenced to 10 years in federal prison in 2006, his attorney unveiled a novel defense strategy, arguing that what the politician had done was just business as usual.



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Dumbfounded, the judge replied: "What you have just said is among the most absurd things I have ever heard."

Robles' reign over South Gate had been marked by allegations of death threats, punches thrown in council chambers and vicious campaign fliers. A bullet fired at Gonzalez bounced off the back of his head; the shooting has never been solved.

The South Gate scandal also made national headlines and sparked cries for reform, but it didn't appear to put a scare into leaders in neighboring towns.

Former Assemblyman Hector De La Torre, who was on the South Gate council then, believes the relative dearth of economic opportunities in the private sector in southeast L.A. County drove some ambitious people to pursue careers in local government.

Most seem ethical, he said. But not all.

"There's that saying: Why rob banks? Because that's where the money is," he said. "Well, why get into government? Because that's where the money is in some of these communities."

De La Torre said the concept of public service is often a secondary consideration, if it is considered at all.

"I talk to a lot of student groups and remind them that the only qualification to be an elected official in the United States is for people to vote for you," De La Torre said. "That's a pretty low bar. I think in these places where there is a political machine, and that machine adopts you, you're going to have a significant advantage against anyone you run against."

When Luis Garcia, a community advocate, ran for a position on the Cudahy City Council a few years ago, his Dodge Dakota was vandalized. A fellow candidate dropped out of the race after receiving death threats on his answering machine. When Garcia announced his intention to run again a year later, a Molotov cocktail was thrown into his car.

"People are interconnected, and the only way you can be brought in is if you're sponsored by the establishment," he said. "When people like myself and others try to come into the system, they feel like something is wrong. It's just part of something that needs to be cleansed."

In local politics, the vast majority of questionable actions never result in criminal charges. In the last 11 years, there have been 3,680 complaints of criminal wrongdoing involving public officials in L.A. County — a statistic that includes cities, county offices, school districts, water boards and other public agencies (southeast L.A. County represented a disproportionate number of the cases, officials said). Of those, 313 resulted in charges being filed.

David Demerjian, the head of the district attorney's public integrity unit, said that even successful prosecutions don't seem to be a deterrent for officials with a penchant for graft. And even after being embarrassed or convicted, some of them end up going to work for other politicians.

"You've got this political machine where even if you're criminally prosecuted you can still land on your feet because someone will hire you," Demerjian said.

For some residents, the corruption scandals have taken on a painful routine.

On Friday it was Cudahy's turn. Federal agents arrested council members and a longtime employee on bribery charges. But court documents painted an even darker picture, with one councilman, Osvaldo Conde, allegedly showing up at a nightclub with a revolver to meet a federal informant and using city employees as bodyguards.

Wiretaps capture the politicians and the informant talking about how much cash it would take to bribe Cudahy officials into granting a permit for a marijuana dispensary. Conde, acting Mayor David

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Silva and Angel Perales were all taken into custody and the investigation continues.

As Conde was being arrested, Graciene Meza, 32, stood nearby, using her cellphone to record the activity of reporters and FBI agents. She and her three children have now lived in three southeast L.A. County cities when malfeasance scandals exploded.

She was living in South Gate when Robles was arrested. She was living in Bell when almost the entire city leadership was taken into custody.

"And now this happened!" Meza said. "I gotta move to Beverly Hills where nothing like this happens."

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Times staff writer Ruben Vives contributed to this report.

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theCanimal at 7:25 AM June 24, 2012

It's the Republicans and Democrats vs. the stupid taxpayers.

terru2000 at 6:02 AM June 24, 2012

I'm not a racist as I'm proud of my brown skin. Also, as I came to US as a legal person back in 70s. However, the common thread among all these smumbags is that they belong to certain type, the one like F. Tony V. We need to dump these scumbags as they leave a bad mark on hard working and legal Latinos.

Carmel-Chocolate-Milk-Banana-GLT at 2:45 AM June 24, 2012

I suppose the cities of southeast Los Angeles County is sampling of what is to come for the rest of the USA when Hispanics become the majority.

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