

## Corruption hits cities in L.A.'s shadows

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A string of gritty suburbs in the shadow of Los Angeles has produced a growing parade of public officials jailed for corruption, and prosecutors say illegal schemes on a scale more commonly associated with big Eastern cities have devoured tens of millions of taxpayer dollars.

The latest to be led away in handcuffs is the former treasurer of South Gate, sentenced this past week to 10 years in prison.

Already known for clogged freeways and fading neighborhoods, the area south of Los Angeles now is drawing additional notoriety for thieving, bribe-grabbing public officials.

With little civic involvement by residents and only glancing media scrutiny, the cities "essentially laid themselves open for corruption, not through any fault of anybody's, but more or less through some sense of benign neglect," said Jennifer Lentz Snyder, an assistant head deputy in the Los Angeles County district attorney's public integrity division.

She believes the corruption is more pervasive than prosecutors have uncovered.

South Gate Treasurer Albert Robles aspired to build a "power machine" to secretly control cities throughout the economically struggling area, according to trial testimony. One now-jailed former mayor from the area sought to steal \$6 million by steering city contracts to a shell company he owned.

South Gate and other towns including Lynwood, Bell Gardens, Maywood, Huntington Park and Vernon dot an area that once was blanketed with cauliflower and berry fields, until it was marketed decades ago as a suburban refuge where homes were affordable, the weather mild and opportunities rich.

Within a generation, a largely white, middle-class population has mostly vanished, replaced by many Hispanics, including a large immigrant population. However, corruption charges have cut across racial lines.

"When new groups come to power, and become entrenched ... then they tend to rule it as a fiefdom," said Jaime Regalado, executive director of the Pat Brown Institute of Public Affairs at California State University, Los Angeles.

And what might be driving the corruption?

"It's a combination of the local, insular political structure ... with the context of poverty and limited opportunity," said Becky M. Nicolaides, author of a book about Los Angeles' working-class suburbs. "That's a recipe for problems."

Those problems have given the area of southeast Los Angeles County at least a whiff of the rogue politics that became the

stuff of legend in New York, Philadelphia and Chicago.

In the South Gate case, Robles, 41, was sentenced on Tuesday to 10 years in federal prison for extracting nearly \$2 million in bribes from contractors, funneling the money to family and friends.

"There are different levels of hoodwinking, but I didn't think hoodwinking was a crime," Robles said in court. He was recalled by voters.

The case's federal prosecutor said Robles turned South Gate into a "pay-to-play" city where bribes were a cost of business.

Some other cases in southeast Los Angeles County include:

- The former mayor of Lynwood was sentenced in March to nearly 16 years in prison for funneling millions of dollars in city contracts to a sham consulting company he secretly controlled. Paul Richards, 50, was found guilty of multiple counts of mail fraud, money laundering, extortion and making false statements to investigators.
- Long-serving Vernon Mayor Leonis Malburg was charged with voter fraud in November, and a former city administrator was accused of bilking \$60,000 in public money to pay for massages, golf outings and other personal perks. Critics have long depicted the tiny city as a virtual company town, where election shenanigans, secrecy and even thuggery were used to maintain power for a few. Malburg has pleaded not guilty.
- Compton's self-proclaimed "gangster mayor" Omar Bradley was sentenced in 2004 to three years in custody for misappropriating public funds and making an unauthorized loan. He and two others were charged with using city-issued credit cards as "personal piggy banks."
- Two former mayors of Carson and one City Council member received prison sentences ranging from home detention to nearly six years for a series of bribery schemes that cost the city more than \$12 million.

Los Angeles County District Attorney Steve Cooley, whose office created a special unit to concentrate on public corruption, says the recent run of cases can be easily explained.

"I think it was going on all the time," he said. "No one was investigating it."

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