

Local

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U.S. sues Hollywood over religion case

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The U.S. Department of Justice is accusing the city of Hollywood of withholding evidence in a religious discrimination case and failing to provide full answers to questions.

The federal agency is suing the city over an Orthodox Jewish group's right to hold religious

services in a house in a residential neighborhood. The city says the Chabad violated zoning laws by gutting the Hollywood Hills home and converting it to a synagogue.

As part of its case, the Justice officials asked the city in August for all records pertaining to Rosa

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Lopez, who claims the Virgin Mary appears at her west Hollywood home on the 13th of each month. Approximately 100 people show up monthly to pray and seek miracles.

The city has never tried to shut her down like they have the Chabad. Officials say Lopez's home is not a house of worship and therefore does not need a special zoning exception.

Hollywood's lawyers in September supplied some documents to the Justice Department, but failed to turn over a series of memos from Police Chief James Scarberry detailing police surveillance of the Lopez home. Those were turned over Feb. 2 — after depositions were taken from top Hollywood officials.

Justice attorney Sean Keveney argued that had the department known police were watching the Lopez house, it would

have done its own surveillance to possibly "rebut any testimony offered by the city." He also accused the city of providing incomplete information regarding why it contends the Lopez home is not a house of worship.

The city says the Chabad violated zoning laws by gutting the Hollywood Hills home and converting it to a synagogue.

Keveney asked U.S. District Court Judge Joan A. Lenard on Monday to issue sanctions against the city and to allow the federal government to re-interview several city officials at the city's expense. Lenard has not yet ruled on the motion.

On Thursday, City Attorney Dan Abbott referred questions to outside counsel Tom McCausland, who could not be reached

for comment.

The city outlined 16 reasons in January why Lopez's house is not comparable to the Hollywood Community Synagogue. They included that the property has not been "architecturally or structurally altered" and that Lopez does not claim publicly that her home is a place of worship.

What the city did not mention, according to Keveney, is the city attorney visited the home in 2004 and noticed gift shop hours posted on the house and "huge religious artifacts," including a sign, a crucifix and a fountain, in the yard.

"I don't know if there have been a lot of structural modifications to the house," Abbott later told city commissioners during a closed-door meeting, "but it certainly does not look like a typical single-family house."

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