

Local

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Tactics against Chabad blasted

Ex-Hollywood official: Scrutiny was 'excessive.'

BY SHANNON O'BOYE
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HOLLYWOOD • The city's former code enforcement chief told federal lawyers she thought the city's scrutiny of an orthodox Jewish group using a private home to conduct services was "excessive."

In a Nov. 10 deposition, Jackie Gonzalez, the city's former director of development administration and economic development, said the city's methods left a "bad taste" in her mouth.

"We visited the Chabad on a regular basis . . . and it was continuous, continuous, continuous, and I felt maybe a little too continuous or excessive," she said.



Oliveri

The issue first arose in late 2000 after the Hollywood Community Synagogue Chabad Lubavitch, which owned two houses on North 46th Avenue near Sheridan Street, set about converting one of the homes into a synagogue for twice-daily services. Neighbors complained about noise, traffic and garbage piling up outside.

City commissioners wrangled publicly over whether to let the Chabad stay. Ultimately they ordered the Chabad out, saying they were protecting the integrity of the neighborhood's residential zoning.

The U.S. Department of Justice and the Chabad Lubavitch are suing the city, accusing city officials of denying the Jewish

Ex-official says scrutiny of Chabad 'excessive'

■ CHABAD

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group a zoning variance based on its religious denomination.

While questioning Gonzalez, justice department lawyer Sean Keveney and a lawyer for the synagogue tried to shed light on how all-consuming the issue became in the city.

They presented documentation they said showed that Commissioner Sal Oliveri pushed city employees to use every tool at their disposal against the Chabad. Some of

the measures included code enforcement visits two or three times per day, police patrols at the site every two or three days, checks of building permits and liens against the property, and running the license plates of the cars parked near the synagogue.

Never during her tenure with the city did a single issue receive so much attention, Gonzalez said.

Gonzalez told the lawyers she preached a "kind and gentle" type of enforcement, encouraging people to comply with codes and ordinances before hammering them with citations and fines.

Former City Manager Sam Finz agreed with her approach, she said, but Oliveri did not.

Oliveri led the push to oust the Chabad. Oliveri, who is being sued individually along with the city, referred calls Tuesday to his attorneys.

Gonzalez said Oliveri confronted her during a meeting in July 2002, questioning her handling of code enforcement at the synagogue.

"I'm not one who gets rattled easily, and after he berated me in front of my peers and my boss, accused me of not doing my job, spoke to me in harsh tones . . . I walked out and went back to my office," Gonzalez said. "I was very upset."

Shortly after that meeting, Gonzalez lost authority over code enforcement and several other divisions. City Manager Cameron Benson said Tuesday he made the move because he wanted her to focus strictly on economic development — the City Commission's top priority.

But the prosecutor asked Gonzalez if she thought she was "stripped of responsibility" because Oliveri was unhappy with her handling of the Chabad properties. Gonzalez said she had heard statements to that effect but said she could not remember from whom.

Gonzalez left the city in February for a private sector job.

Oliveri's lawyer, Carlos Mustelier, said he did not agree with the federal prosecutor's interpretation that Gonzalez was demoted because Oliveri was dissatisfied with her.

Heidi O'Sheehan, who lives across the alley from the synagogue, said Tuesday she did not feel Oliveri acted inappropriately or that the city harassed the Chabad.

"It's large groups of people meeting two times per day every day during prime hours when people are trying to enjoy their homes," she said.

Franklin Zemel, who represents the synagogue, said he feels the city denied the synagogue a zoning variance to operate out of a house because it was "too controversial."

"Government can make up any excuse it wants as to why they are doing certain actions," he said. ". . . It's not about whether the Chabad should be there or not. It's about the abuse by the city to harass and intimidate and run them out of town. That's the problem."

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