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Comments for Public Posting: What do Jose Huizar and Gustavo Valdivia have in common (besides being investigated by the feds)? They are both very sloppy with paperwork. If my closet was as full of skeletons as Gustavo's and if I had been as laissez faire with the law, I wouldn't tempt fate by trying to get my daughter on a commission. How hilarious would it be if this is what makes his house of cards topple?

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FBI investigates bribery allegations at Department of Building and Safety

BY DAVID ZAHNISER, LOS ANGELES TIMES

FEB. 8, 2012 12 AM PT



FBI agents probing allegations of bribe-taking at the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety have obtained records and questioned individuals about a soft-spoken building inspector who retired from his post nearly a year ago.

Federal investigators have interviewed current and former department employees about Samuel In, a Korean-speaking employee who had been assigned to Koreatown and nearby neighborhoods.

Building and Safety officials have responded to a grand jury request for documents on In, who quit his job last May, two days after he was placed on administrative leave amid an internal corruption investigation.

“We have turned all the information we have on Sam In over to the FBI,” said Robert “Bud” Ovrom, the department’s general manager.

In, 64, said in an interview that he has done nothing wrong and did not accept bribes. “If I was wrong or bad, I don’t think [a person] could sleep,” said In, sitting in the backyard of his hillside Glendale home. “I always sleep with peace.”

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An FBI spokeswoman would not confirm or deny the existence of an investigation.

Gregory Glover, a former inspector who was assigned to the Koreatown area at the same time as In, said he is among those interviewed by the FBI. Glover, who left the department in 2010, said he told agents last year that In repeatedly interfered with his efforts to inspect or cite single-family homes that contained illegal residential units or other unpermitted work.

Glover said he described for investigators an incident from 2005 or 2006. In showed up at a property on Crenshaw Boulevard where he was already conducting an inspection and asked him to take a morning break at the Rotex, a hotel-restaurant on Olympic Boulevard, Glover said. Partway into the tea, In put an envelope on the table — one that clearly had money in it, according to Glover.

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“He said, ‘Greg, we’d really like to have you working with us.’” Glover said. “I told him, ‘I’ve already got a job. I work for the Department of Building and Safety.’ And I put my finger on the table and pushed the envelope back.”

In, who was assigned to the district represented by Council President Herb Wesson, denied offering any co-worker money.

Glover said he notified his supervisors of the incident and was ushered into a closed-door meeting with three building officials. He said he was told the department had investigated In but had found no proof of improper activity.

“Basically from that point on, I knew what the message was,” Glover said. “It was ‘Greg, shut ... up.’”

Building and Safety spokesman David Lara said department officials don’t recall such a meeting. Ovrom, who took over as head of the department in 2010, said he advised FBI agents to speak with Glover last year, after receiving a call from the former inspector.

Roughly three years after the incident alleged by Glover, lawyers in the Los Angeles city attorney’s office received a different complaint about In, this time from a businessperson in Koreatown. That caller alleged that In had been saying that he could secure certain kinds of city permits in exchange for \$10,000, said Bill Carter, senior deputy to City Atty. Carmen Trutanich. The allegations were referred to the Los Angeles Police Department, which conducted an investigation but never made any arrests.

LAPD Lt. Mathew St. Pierre said investigators struggled without success to find potential witnesses to come forward to discuss the allegations, which centered on permits for tutoring centers. “We talked to 25 or 30 business owners, and no one would talk to us, including people that were referred to us as victims,” he said.

Information about the probe has been shared with federal investigators, Carter said.

A year later, another complaint surfaced, this time in Superior Court. Korean landlord Kyong Ho Cho sued In, alleging breach of contract, saying he advised him to pay a company \$15,000 to resolve his permitting problems with the housing department. Cho alleged he paid the money, but In never followed through. Cho's lawsuit also claimed that In told him he had a business partnership with the company that received the money, Max Construction.

Max Construction's lawyer, Michael Sinkov, told The Times last year that Cho's case was "totally meritless." Sinkov said In was dropped from the case after he agreed to pay a \$10,000 settlement.

Since the FBI began investigating the building department, two inspectors have pleaded guilty to federal bribery charges and two others have been fired.

In was on the periphery of another corruption investigation in 2008. That year, he contacted a housing department official to report allegations that Eun Chavis, a clerk in the city's housing department, had demanded money from Korean landlords trying to resolve their permitting problems, according to court documents.

Chavis, 59, was arrested and later convicted on a single count of felony bribery.

A year later, In was listed in state records as chief executive officer of Grande Vista Associates, a consulting firm that had previously been linked to a scandal at the city's Housing Authority. A Times investigation in 2007 found that Victor Taracena, a construction manager for the authority, steered contracts to politically connected firms, including Grande Vista, without competitive bidding or after rigged contests.

One bidder told The Times that he tapped Gustavo Valdivia, a former aide to Councilman Jose Huizar who was Grande Vista's lead consultant, to help him compete for the work — and found out that Grande Vista had secretly submitted its own lower bid. The housing authority paid Grande Vista nearly \$99,000 to prepare schematic drawings of restrooms, parking stalls and ramps and other areas.

A federal grand jury indicted Taracena in May on bribery and conspiracy charges, accusing him of awarding contracts to phony companies created by his brothers and then receiving kickbacks. Grande Vista was not mentioned in the indictment.

Taracena is believed to be in Guatemala and has not entered a plea. Neither Valdivia nor his lawyer would comment.

A spokesman for the housing authority said his agency still does not know if Grande Vista performed the job for which it was paid.

In said he received no income from Grande Vista and got involved with the firm as a volunteer only to learn more about public outreach, one of the services the firm provides. In also said Valdivia asked him to be an officer.

"I'm a very simple person. If I can help people, I will help. It's all a positive thing for me," he said.

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