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Ex-Vernon leader pleads guilty in public corruption case

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Former Vernon City Administrator Donal O'Callaghan pleaded guilty Friday to felony conflict-of-interest charges related to the hiring of his wife as a city contractor, the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office announced.

The contracts awarded to O'Callaghan's wife, Kimberly McBride O'Callaghan, were [first reported by The Times last year](#) as part of a series of stories on high salaries and benefits paid to the city's top officials. O'Callaghan -- who had made as much as \$785,000 in total compensation in 2009 -- was indicted in October and resigned from his position at Vernon City Hall.

He is the third Vernon official to plead guilty to public corruption charges since 2006. The city's former mayor, Leonis Malburg, pleaded guilty to voter fraud in 2009, and its former city administrator, Bruce Malkenhorst, pleaded guilty to misappropriation of public funds earlier this year.

The string of charges has fueled an unprecedented effort in the state Legislature to disband Vernon and replace it with a new special district. A package of disincorporation bills, sponsored by Assembly Speaker John Perez (D-Los Angeles), is set to be considered by the state Senate next month.

O'Callaghan, 55, was sentenced to 200 hours of community service and one year summary probation, the district attorney's office said in a statement.

The charges were based on two different agreements Vernon approved with O'Callaghan's wife. The first came in 2007, when she was hired through Project Labor Group, a city subcontractor. After the company folded, she was hired to a second contract in 2009 through the city's Light & Power department.

Public records show that in addition to Kimberly O'Callaghan, at least six other relatives of Vernon officials were hired through Project Labor Group, including Malkenhorst's children and the siblings of another Vernon city administrator, Eric T. Fresch.

Prosecutors focused on O'Callaghan, however, saying that state conflict-of-interest laws specifically prohibit officials from hiring someone with whom they share direct financial interest, such as a spouse.

"The law is very clear in what it defines as criminal and not criminal, regardless of what is unethical or improper or a horrible practice for a public agency," said Deputy Dist. Atty. Max Huntsman. "The law says you commit a conflict of interest when you make a decision for which you have a financial interest in."

O'Callaghan's attorney, Mark Werksman, described the law as "unforgiving" and "hard to get around." Werksman said his client was upfront with Vernon's City Council and city attorney about his wife's work for the Vernon Light & Power Department, and that none of them realized her employment was illegal.

"Even though Donal may have technically violated the law, he's not a criminal," Werksman said. "He provided a valuable service to the city, as did his wife."

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-- Sam Allen and Hector Becerra

Photo: Donal O'Callaghan. Credit: City of Vernon



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