



January 29, 2024

Former Ethics Commission President Serena Oberstein released the following statement on the recent sentencing of Councilmember Jose Huizar:

“Los Angeles faces a crisis of conscience. Over the weekend, for the third time in three years, a former member of the Los Angeles City Council has been sentenced to serve time in prison after being found guilty of abusing their powerful position. But the entirety of the corruption has not yet left the Council. Thankfully, voters will have an opportunity to send a message to the Council in March by not re-electing councilmember John Lee - a central player in one of the city’s most egregious ethics scandals.

“While it was Huizar who was sentenced to 13 years in prison, his crimes are inextricably connected to the crimes committed by Council District 12’s former councilmember - Mitch Englander, who was also sentenced to prison for accepting bribes which were discovered by the FBI in connection with Huizar and his former deputy, George Esparza, who was in Las Vegas with Englander and Lee. As a reminder, Esparza will be sentenced in July and is facing up to 20 years in prison. The Englander case revealed that Councilmember Lee was directly involved in these crimes, and Lee faces 10 counts of ethics violations for his involvement in the scandal. Though the Ethics Commission has yet to rule on the series of charges against Lee, there is no suitable explanation for Lee’s close involvement with this illegal activity. In the best case scenario, Lee was present for the criminal activity and neither reported the illegal activity nor did anything to stop it or call it out. More likely, he was an active participant in the bribes, money laundering and cover-up. Either way, Lee’s involvement demonstrates something incredibly important about both his character and his self-centered priorities as a councilmember.

“Even though these crimes put our city, our economy, and the institution at risk, Lee took no action to stop it. In fact, he capitalized on the opportunity it opened for him when his former boss went to prison, running for the city council himself. And to this day, whether he’s been protecting the criminals who served on council previously, actively conspiring with them, or committed the crimes himself, Lee has made it clear that he cares more about maintaining his power as an elected official. And in doing so, he has failed our community.

“Since John Lee has taken office, homelessness has increased by 45%. Communities have become less safe under his watch, as incidences of violent crime are all on the rise in 2023 vs 2022. Small businesses have fled our community under the weight of burdensome regulations, high rents and ineffective leadership.

“As the former president of the Los Angeles Ethics Commission, I had a front-row seat to the Ethics Department’s resource deficiency that hampers it from fully addressing corruption in L.A. While we took on important cases and doled out severe but fair penalties to those who deserved the stiff arm of justice, more must — and can — be done to strengthen the Ethics Department. [I detailed my thoughts about additional](#)

[actions needed in a piece I wrote several years ago.](#) Sadly, things have not changed since.

“Angelenos deserve real reform. We shouldn’t have to wait for another FBI probe to restore faith in our democracy. It’s not enough to talk about what’s broken. We need bold action that leads to real solutions and we need it now. That’s why I’m running for City Council.”

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