

Councilman's Son Is Suspect in Drug Case

Officer says that after she found meth in the younger Albert Vera's pickup, his father made threats. The elder Vera denies the allegation.

By ANDREW BLANKSTEIN
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When Culver City Police Officer Heidi Keyantash pulled over a Dodge pickup truck on Sepulveda Boulevard and found what appeared to be methamphetamine, it seemed like a routine drug arrest.

But the suspect, Albert Vera, 39, was the son of Culver City Councilman Albert M. Vera.

Keyantash, in an internal memo to Police Chief John Montanio, alleged that the elder Vera showed up, threatened her and interfered with her investigation during the Aug. 7 incident. She said he "accused me of being 'out to get' his son and threatened me that, 'Well, I'll get you! I promise, I'll get you.'"

The councilman denied any wrongdoing. He said his business is two blocks from the scene, and he went there after a customer said he saw the younger Vera surrounded by police.

"I went to see what happened. I didn't interfere at all" in the investigation, the councilman said.

Keyantash also said Montanio ordered her to omit reference to the councilman's actions at the crime scene from her report

of the incident.

The elder Vera said Montanio went to his store an hour after the arrest to talk about the incident.

"The chief came by to make sure everything was OK and ask if he could do anything for me, not my son," the councilman recalled. "He [Montanio] said, 'Albert, it's going to be in the hands of the D.A.' I said, 'Well, there's nothing much I can do about it,' and it was left that way."

Lt. Carlos Reynosa, a spokesman for Montanio, said the department has done "nothing inappropriate in the handling of the Vera Jr. case."

"Allegations or information of any wrongdoing by the chief of police or any member of this Police Department have not been received by anyone in the Police Department or in the city, except from the press," he said.

Reynosa said the chief welcomed an independent investigation "from the district attorney's office or any other investigative body designated by the mayor and the City Council."

"I continue to be very uncomfortable with the handling of this matter, which may have jeopardized the investigation and placed me in a position of liability," Keyantash wrote in the Aug. 30 memo in which she asked the chief "to properly document Vera Sr.'s actions during this incident in a formal crime report."

Robert Wexler, head of the Culver City Peace Officers Assn., said the incident was mishandled. "If he [the councilman] wasn't trying to throw around his political weight, what was he doing there?" Wexler asked. "From the association's perspective, we are very troubled by the fact that a council member can make threats against a police officer, interferes with an investigation and apparently [is] able to do so with impunity."

City Councilman Alan Corlin called the allegations "extremely troubling."

"We need to get to the bottom as quickly as possible," Corlin said. "This is the kind of thing that can completely erode confidence in our city and in particular our Police Department."

According to Keyantash's three-page letter to Montanio, the elder Vera showed up at the scene as his son was being questioned, threatened the officer and grabbed the keys for the pickup out of the officer's hand rather than allow the vehicle to be towed.

The younger Vera remains free on \$20,000 bail after being charged with felony drug possession. He is scheduled to appear in court later this month, said Jane Robison, spokeswoman for the Los Angeles County district attorney's office.

In an earlier case, the younger Vera pleaded no contest in January to carrying a loaded firearm and was sentenced to 36 months' probation.

The elder Vera was elected to the council in 1992 and reelected in 1996, serving two terms as mayor pro tem over that period. He left the City Council because of term limits, but was reelected after a two-year absence.