

Residents Voice Concerns About Building and Safety Abuse at Westside Meeting

Community members express frustration with loopholes and enforcement by the city department, and officials say more oversight is necessary.

By [Devin Kelly](#) | August 4, 2011



Los Angeles City Councilmember Dennis Zine, right, address a room of mostly Westside residents about reforms proposed to the Buildings and Safety department. At left, fellow councilmember Bernard Parks. Credit [Devin Kelly](#)

Westside residents attested to a widespread culture of neglect and abuse in the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety at a City Council committee meeting Wednesday night.

A recent [bribery scandal](#) prompted Los Angeles City Councilman Dennis Zine to introduce reforms intended to provide more oversight, code enforcement and penalties for city employees and developers. These proposals were on the agenda for the council's Audits and Governmental Efficiency Committee meeting at the West Los Angeles Municipal Building.

But public commenters also decried a lack of enforcement in the department, and detailed specific zoning violations in communities. Repairing strained relations with neighborhood and community councils will be a priority for the department moving forward, said Robert “Bud” Ovrom, general manager of Building and Safety.

The meeting is the latest step in a series of serious repercussions for the department after an anonymous tip in January led to an FBI probe into bribery allegations.

In June, two department employees pleaded guilty to charges of soliciting and receiving bribes in exchange for approving building permits. The cases exposed a vulnerable system in need of stronger investigative and oversight powers, Ovrom said.

"We can't tolerate corruption in this city," said Zine, chair of the Audits and Governmental Efficiency Committee.

Residents brought up other issues besides corruption at Wednesday's meeting. Planning Commission decisions never seem to be enforced by Building and Safety, said Steve Sann, president of the Westwood Community Council. Hard-fought requirements fall by the wayside before they can be fulfilled, he added.

"It's like the city is Swiss cheese," Sann said.

A mechanism needs to be in place to enforce the decisions the Planning Commission makes, Sann said.

"Or it means nothing," Zine said, nodding in agreement.

Patricia Hearst, a former chair of the Federation of Hillside and Canyon Associates, called the city's efforts at enforcement a "joke."

Miscommunication about the definition of zoning violations between housing inspectors and Building and Safety employees frustrates landlords, said Bill Hooey, president of the Fair Housing Coalition. Landlords' properties have been repossessed for lack of compliance, he said.

Zine told Patch that he was surprised by the number of complaints that emerged at the Westside meeting. Five speakers from the public brought up specific zoning violations including illegal walls and neglected, barren planters.

Zine directed his assistant to record the locations, often asking a public commenter to repeat an address. He promised a follow-up investigation of each site. Allegations of criminal activity will be turned over to the FBI, Zine said.

Proposed reforms include a ["Clean Hands" ordinance](#) that would bar the city from issuing permits to repeat violators, a current "major loophole," Zine said.

Multiple speakers applauded the ordinance at the meeting, though Tom Freeman of the Brentwood Residents Coalition said the ordinance should be carefully drafted.

"The devil is in the details," Freeman said. "We need to have an ordinance that clearly states what kind of violations count in this."

Los Angeles County enacted a Clean Hands policy 25 years ago and has yet to lose a legal challenge, said meeting attendee Ben Saltsman, planning deputy for Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky.

The city intends to base the language of its ordinance on the county's, but the two measures would not be identical, Zine said.

“We recognize the county policy doesn’t have all the teeth we want to put into ours,” Zine said.

Other proposals include establishing an investigation unit and special investigator position to keep a tighter check on department operations. The special investigator’s \$200,000 annual salary would come from fees paid by developers, not taxpayers, Ovrom said.

Equipping city employees’ cellphones with GPS devices to track activity is also on the table.

None of the measures would be a silver bullet, Zine said. But he predicted tangible effects on Building and Safety.

“Something’s going to change,” the councilman said. “I will scrap this department if nothing changes ... and I’ll issue all the building permits.”

The Department of Building and Safety is encouraging residents to call a hotline to report possible zoning violations or criminal activity.