

SERIES: CORRUPT AMERICA ♦

City Hall for Sale

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

More than one million dollars in cash and benefits, collected through a city council seat, in exchange for favorable votes on downtown Los Angeles development projects worth hundreds of millions. I'm Marty Shepard, and this is Corrupt America.

CAROL

One million dollars, across multiple years, from multiple people. That's not a moment of weakness — that's a policy.

MARTY

Jose Huizar represented the fourteenth district on the Los Angeles City Council from two thousand five until his indictment in two thousand twenty — fifteen years in office, covering Boyle Heights, El Sereno, and a stretch of downtown Los Angeles that, in those years, was transforming faster than almost anywhere else in the country. A building boom brought cranes to the skyline, luxury towers onto blocks that had been parking lots for decades, and billions of dollars in development requests through the city's approval process. All of it needed sign-off from city government. All of it needed a councilmember's support.

CAROL

And council members have real power over what gets approved in their district. It's not ceremonial — a councilmember can advance a project or hold it in place for a very long time.

MARTY

A very long time. Huizar also sat on the Planning and Land Use Management Committee, which amplified that power considerably. For developers working on major projects in or near the fourteenth district, his support was, in practical terms, something they needed. Some of them decided to buy it. What Huizar admitted to — in a guilty plea entered in June of two thousand twenty-three — was racketeering conspiracy and tax evasion. Racketeering in this context means running an ongoing criminal enterprise through a public office. That is not an

allegation. He pleaded guilty. It is established fact.

CAROL

Cash and in kind — what does "in kind" look like in this case?

MARTY

Trips to Las Vegas. Gambling chips covered by developers and their associates. A political fundraiser that Huizar used, in part, to settle a personal legal debt — a sexual harassment lawsuit. Payments routed through associates and staff. One of the central projects in the federal record involved a hotel tower proposed for downtown Los Angeles, backed by a Chinese development company. The company wanted city approvals. Huizar wanted money and benefits. Over several years, according to his own admissions, the transaction was made.

CAROL

The tax evasion charge — I keep wanting to treat that as the secondary thing, and I know it isn't.

MARTY

It is never secondary. When you collect more than a million dollars in unreported benefits and fail to report any of it to the I R S, you have committed a separate federal crime, and the paper trail for that crime is your own tax returns, sitting in a filing system, waiting. The F B I searched Huizar's city hall office in two thousand eighteen. That search opened two years of investigation before the indictment came in two thousand twenty. Federal investigations of this kind are thorough in a way that is not particularly comforting if you have been treating a city council seat as a private income stream.

CAROL

My neighbor was audited over a home-office deduction she had receipts for everything for, and it still took eight months to resolve, and she couldn't sleep through any of them. The idea of actually having something to hide in that situation is not imaginable to me.

MARTY

The gap between what a federal investigation can find and what someone hoped to keep private is, historically, smaller than the person hoped. Huizar was indicted in June of two thousand twenty. It is worth noting, just in passing, that this was the same city and the same decade in which a separate set of federal prosecutors was also building a very different case involving public money and homelessness contractors in Los Angeles — but that is a different story, and Huizar's is the one we are here for.

CAROL

Three years between the indictment and the plea. That is a long time to be in that particular waiting room.

MARTY

It is. And while it is a long time for anyone, the fourteenth district still had constituents during those three years — people calling the office about permit delays and broken sidewalks and noise complaints, dealing with whatever the office had become in his absence, while the former councilman's federal case moved through the courts. In June of two thousand twenty-three, Huizar pleaded guilty to racketeering conspiracy and tax evasion. In January of two thousand twenty-four, he was sentenced to thirteen years in federal prison. He was also ordered to pay restitution — to the City of Los Angeles, and to the I R S.

CAROL

Restitution to the city. Which means the residents of Los Angeles are, in the formal legal sense, the victims. People who paid their taxes, voted in council elections, showed up to public comment hearings on their block. Them.

MARTY

Exactly them. And the restitution order captures what can be calculated: the bribes, the unpaid taxes, the measurable damage. What it cannot capture is what the city did not get in those years — projects shaped around a developer's payments rather than a neighborhood's needs, approvals that moved because someone paid and not because the project served the public, decisions made in a framework that had nothing to do with the public record. That cost is real. It simply does not have a line in the sentencing order.

CAROL

It's like finding out your electricity bill has been wrong for years. You can correct the number in front of you. You cannot fully reconstruct what you should have had.

MARTY

Several others connected to Huizar's network also pleaded guilty or were charged in the course of the investigation — a former chief of staff, a political consultant, developers and their representatives. The scheme required participants, and it had them. But Jose Huizar was the office, and it was his plea, and it is his sentence. Thirteen years. Restitution owed to the people of Los Angeles and to the federal government. And somewhere in the filings of the United States District Court for the Central District of California, the full accounting is written: every project, every payment, every benefit that passed

through an office that residents assumed was there to serve them. It was not serving them. It was a business. And the customers were not the residents of the fourteenth district. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol. Thanks for sitting with us.