

# Commission director bills several thousand dollars for hotel stays, other expenses

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REDDING, California - A local official has charged the agency she heads several thousand dollars to cover the costs of Redding hotel stays in what may be a breach of her contract, the Record Searchlight has learned.

Between July and December 2014, Executive Officer Jan Lopez used a debit card issued by the Shasta Local Area Formation Commission to pay \$2,250 for rooms and related expenses at the Red Lion Hotel and Motel 6 in Redding, financial documents show.

During that same time period Lopez charged an additional \$897 to her Shasta LAFCO debit card for hotel rooms and meals in Fall River Mills despite a stipulation in her contract that says she must pay out-of-pocket for all in-county travel, lodging and other expenses, according to records.

Lopez maintains that those expenses were for her safety and part of the costs of doing business last year as Shasta LAFCO scrambled to complete dozens of mandatory studies by year's end under a settlement stemming from a class-action lawsuit.

Lopez, who lives about an hour southwest of Redding in the Trinity Alps Preserve area, said the local hotel stays were sometimes necessary after putting in 10- to 12-hour days or in preparation for upcoming Shasta LAFCO meetings, which were

doubled in the last few months of 2014 in an effort to meet deadlines set by the lawsuit. The Fall River Mill expenses were for LAFCO-related business and meetings with special districts there, she said.

“Yes I used the card, yes I was on agency business and yes those are the normal expenses you incur on agency business,” she said. “Those disbursements were issued to the (Shasta LAFCO) Fiscal Committee and they approved all of them, and then they went to the (full Shasta LAFCO) commission in the mid-year report,” which was approved during a meeting last week.

Questions over those expenditures led long-time LAFCO Commissioner Les Baugh earlier this month to resign from his post on the organization’s fiscal committee, while other members of that board have come to Lopez’s defense.

“There was no discussion in regards to spending within the county, and had it been presented to the commission I would have certainly voted no,” Baugh said when asked Friday about the disbursement statements. “I suppose you can make the argument that we received line-item reports at most of the meetings, but I would have never anticipated that in a line item there was money spent on items not discussed with the commission and not included in the budget.”

Citing privacy concerns over closed-session discussions, Baugh declined to say if a recent Shasta LAFCO special meeting convened to consider Lopez’s contract — which is up for renewal — was related to discrepancies over disbursements.

“The things I’m discussing with you are specifically public information,” he said.

Commissioner Brenda Haynes said she had reviewed all of those disbursements as a member of the fiscal committee and didn’t see a cause for concern.

“I know there are some hotel and restaurant charges, but given the long days and extreme pressure Jan Lopez was under to get LAFCO back on track I’m not concerned with any of those charges,” she said.

Lopez was hired in October 2013 on a 15-month, \$80,000 contract with the task of clearing a backlog of 51 overdue sphere-of-influence updates and municipal service reviews by the end of 2014 to comply with a lawsuit. All of those are necessary studies local special districts and cities need to provide services and plan for future expansion.

On average, LAFCO handles less than a dozen such studies annually. All but one of those overdue studies was completed by the suit's deadline.

LAFCO commissioners voted Thursday to extend her contract until their April 2 meeting, when the matter will be revisited.

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