

# Corruption probe focuses on Maywood

Federal, state and local authorities are looking into claims that a tow firm owner who has city contracts lavished trips and meals on officials.

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The owner of a tow truck company that landed a lucrative contract with the city of Maywood has spent thousands of dollars entertaining police and public officials, including paying for meals; tickets to sporting events and trips to Las Vegas, records and interviews show.

Two members of the City Council have acknowledged failing to report the gifts as required by state law.

Known in Maywood by the moniker "Bravo" or sometimes "Tony Bravo," the owner's real name is Tooradj Khosroabadi. Since 1998, he has made millions towing cars, largely through an aggressive campaign by the city to rid its streets of drunk or unlicensed drivers by impounding their vehicles.

The storage charges were sometimes so high that drivers — many of them illegal immigrants — forfeited their cars rather than pay. Some of the cars were purchased by police officers.

Allegations that Khosroabadi paid kickbacks to police officials and rank-and-file officers who targeted motorists are part of a broader investigation now facing the tiny city in southeast Los Angeles County.

The FBI, the state attorney general and the Los Angeles County district attorney in recent months have requested copies of the city's towing records and have questioned witnesses about complaints of corruption.

Authorities are also looking into unrelated allegations of police brutality.

The Times has confirmed through receipts and interviews that Khosroabadi entertained officials at the same time he was renegotiating his contract to increase his storage fees. Under the agreement, signed in 2004, Khosroabadi was given exclusive towing rights until 2015.

Khosroabadi declined to be interviewed for this article. A relative with detailed knowledge of his business dealings, who spoke on the condition that she not be identified because she did not want to be associated with any controversy, described him as a kind and generous man who worked hard to become successful in a highly competitive business.

The woman said Khosroabadi would never knowingly break the law by attempting to bribe or otherwise unduly influence a public official.

"He is one of the most honest people I know," she said.

According to interviews and court documents, top police officials made an effort to help Khosroabadi's business succeed.

Maywood Police Officer Pablo Cunningham, who has accused the department of retaliating against him for reporting an array of alleged misconduct, has said in court papers that Police Chief Bruce Leflar once called a meeting at which he pressured officers on behalf of Khosroabadi, telling them he "needs more impounds."

Leflar, who abruptly stopped showing up for work late last year, declined to comment.

It was not just the chief who was allegedly applying pressure on officers, according to Cunningham's lawsuit. Cunningham said he was shown an e-mail from a lieutenant to two sergeants discussing the lack of traffic enforcement by some officers. The lieutenant encouraged the sergeants to use whatever means necessary, the e-mail said, "to get them to see the light and get into the game."

According to Colleen Flynn, a lawyer involved in a separate class-action suit against the city, Cunningham told her that officers initiating the most number of impounds were rewarded by being allowed to work four 10-hour days so they would have three days off.

Cunningham said officers targeted motorists whom they believed were illegal immigrants; their alleged offenses were derisively referred to as "driving while wet," according to Flynn.

Cunningham declined to be interviewed by The Times. He is currently suspended, pending an investigation into alleged misconduct on his part that department officials would not disclose. But his attorney, Bradley C. Gage, confirmed the details of Cunningham's remarks to Flynn.

Richard Lyons, who was appointed interim police chief earlier this year, said he would not tolerate even the perception of a conflict of interest between his officers and the towing company.

At the height of the towing campaign, Khosroabadi's company — Maywood Club Tow — was hauling off more than 300 vehicles a month, records show, many of them older models driven by immigrants without driver's licenses. The vehicles were impounded for up to thirty days, and the owners were charged for storage. The rates — \$20 a day for small vehicles and \$28 a day for larger ones — resulted in bills that would often exceed the value of the vehicles.

The city of Maywood also received a cut for each vehicle that was towed, generating hundreds of thousands of dollars for city coffers.

Many motorists had their vehicles seized at random traffic checkpoints, at which Khosroabadi would station catering trucks and let officers help themselves to free food and drinks, officials confirmed.

The checkpoints were often set up at rush hour on Atlantic Boulevard and Slauson Avenue, the city's main thoroughfares, resulting in traffic jams that backed up into neighboring cities.

Alleged offenders would be ushered to side streets where police vehicles and tow trucks would be waiting.

After widespread citizen complaints in 2003, the Maywood City Council voted to discontinue the checkpoints but allowed police to continue looking for drunk and unlicensed drivers. In 2005, the council placed tighter restrictions on when vehicles could be towed, dramatically reducing the number impounded.

Through the years, Khosroabadi attended to high-ranking police officials and council members whose support was critical to his business.

In November 1998, for example, Khosroabadi paid to fly then-Chief Rick Lopez, Lopez's wife, his wife's sister and an officer who was married to the sister to Las Vegas. A year later, he renegotiated his contract with the city, increasing the towing and storage fees, records show.

In a recent interview, Lopez acknowledged going on the trip with Khosroabadi, but said it had no influence on the changes in the contract.

Lopez said he and Khosroabadi were in Las Vegas together "about a half dozen times" and that Khosroabadi often paid for meals and would take care of accommodations. Lopez said he would sometimes reciprocate, but that Khosroabadi would get offended when he tried to do so.

Lopez said he did not see any conflict of interest in allowing Khosroabadi to pay for his meals.

"My conscience is clear," said Lopez, now an officer with a small department in Orange County. "I didn't do anything illegal."

On at least two occasions, Khosroabadi also provided Las Vegas hotel rooms for Maywood officers who participated in the annual Baker to Vegas Challenge Cup Relay race that draws runners from law enforcement agencies throughout the state, Khosroabadi's relative confirmed.

City Councilman and former Mayor Sam Peña said he was in Las Vegas with Khosroabadi "maybe

three or four times" between 2000 and 2004.

Peña said he paid for his own airfare and hotel, but that Khosroabadi picked up the tab for meals in Las Vegas and elsewhere.

"Khosroabadi was one of those people who would hate not to pay for dinner," Peña said recently.

Councilman George Martinez also acknowledged being present at several dinners where Khosroabadi picked up the tab. But Martinez said he could not recall where or when they occurred or who else was there.

Councilman Thomas Martin said Khosroabadi treated him to about half a dozen lunches and dinners between 1998 and 2005, and on at least one occasion the tow truck company operator lobbied to have the city reinstate the checkpoints.

"He said the city was putting him out of business," the councilman recalled. Martin said he told Khosroabadi that he couldn't help him. After that, Martin said, "we didn't have anything else to talk about."

Through his relative, Khosroabadi denied trying to lobby Martin to reinstitute the checkpoints. Under state law, council members are required to report gifts, including meals and entertainment, totaling more than \$50 a year from a single source. Maywood does not require police officials to report gifts they receive.

Neither Martinez nor Peña documented the meals that Khosroabadi paid for, which both said was a mistake.

"I didn't do my due diligence," Peña said. Nonetheless, he insisted that nothing improper occurred.

Martin said his meals did not exceed \$50 in a single year.

Both Peña and Martinez reported receiving thousands of dollars in campaign contributions over the past decade from Khosroabadi and his relatives.

Peña said he stopped accepting donations from Khosroabadi after residents began complaining about the towing campaign.

"I knew that people would be looking at my financial statements and going 'Ah ha,' " Peña said. "I didn't need that frustration, and Mr. Khosroabadi didn't need that frustration."

Michael Ramezani, a former associate of Khosroabadi's, said the relationships that the tow truck company owner developed with Peña, Lopez and others were orchestrated to ensure that Khosroabadi — and his company — would remain in the good graces of city leaders.

Ramezani is suing Khosroabadi for allegedly cheating him out of a 50% stake in Maywood Club Tow, which, according to Ramezani, was worth \$5 million in 2002. Ramezani claims in court papers that he gave Khosroabadi more than \$100,000 in seed money and access to his American Express Gold Card to get the company started, based on the promise that he would be a full partner in the business.

Khosroabadi acknowledged in court papers that he received the money and access to the credit

card, but said they were loans that have since been repaid. The civil case, originally filed in Los Angeles County Superior Court, is awaiting arbitration, Ramezani's attorney said.

In an interview with The Times, Ramezani said Khosroabadi was struggling to keep the company afloat when Ramezani began providing the cash infusions in the late 1990s.

Some of the money, Ramezani said, was used to entertain Maywood officials, such as the trip to Las Vegas in 1998 with then-Police Chief Lopez. Ramezani, who said he also went along on that trip, said Khosroabadi made it clear that he intended to show the chief a good time.

Ramezani said Lopez and the others stayed at the MGM Grand and were treated to a Siegfried and Roy show at the Mirage. They were supposed to attend an Oscar De La Hoya boxing match, but the fight was postponed. Ramezani also said he gave Khosroabadi \$5,000 in cash, which Khosroabadi was going to give to Lopez for gambling.

Lopez denied ever being given cash by Khosroabadi.

In addition to the Las Vegas trip, Ramezani produced a receipt for six floor-level Los Angeles Lakers tickets valued at \$1,050. The bill was charged to Ramezani, but the invoice shows that the tickets were to be picked up by Khosroabadi. Ramezani said Khosroabadi used them to entertain Maywood officials.

Over the years, police arrested only a relative handful of drunk-driving suspects, compared with thousands of unlicensed drivers whose cars were impounded. The city receives \$225 for every car towed, but its annual revenue has declined as the number of vehicles impounded has decreased.

Peña, the councilman, said the city has been feeling a financial pinch ever since.

However, in nearby Cudahy — where Maywood police also patrol — towing revenue has lately been on the rise. Khosroabadi holds the contract in that town too.

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