

[culvercitycrossroads.com /2023/04/13/dear-editor-real-estate-money-and-the-appearance-of-corruption/](https://culvercitycrossroads.com/2023/04/13/dear-editor-real-estate-money-and-the-appearance-of-corruption/)

Dear Editor – Real Estate Money and the Appearance of Corruption

Dear Editor:

At the March 13, 2023 Culver City Council Meeting, a public commenter asked Councilmember Dan O'Brien to recuse himself from voting on whether to allow cars on Main Street, because the developer Hackman Capital Partners — who provided substantial financial support for O'Brien's 2022 election — owns the parking garage that Main Street feeds into.

The City Attorney explained that a new California law regulating pay-to-play politics doesn't apply to the 2022 election, and she's right: even though state legal counsel issued guidance that the statute should apply, the Fair Political Practices Commission overruled that guidance in deciding that 2022 contributions would be exempt from the statute.

Recusal may not be legally required — just as Hackman was legally permitted to give the \$1,070 maximum personal contribution to O'Brien's campaign and then independently spend nearly \$600,000 to get O'Brien elected — but as residents we should demand more of our elected officials. Behavior that may be totally legal can still lead to unethical conduct. And even the appearance of corruption erodes trust in our democratic institutions.

This isn't the only instance of Culver City real estate interests using legal means to outspend individual contribution maximums. Entities and individuals associated with the 9925 Jefferson Blvd office project contributed a total of \$8,280 to O'Brien's 2022 campaign.

And earlier, in the 2020 election, executives at E&S Ring Management, the landlord for Culver City's biggest apartment complex, gave \$2,000 to Councilmember Göran Eriksson's reelection campaign. Now, Eriksson is pushing the rest of the City Council to exempt that apartment complex from portions of the city's tenant protections. Look for this matter on an upcoming City Council agenda.

Though I'm writing here in my personal capacity, I also sit on the Culver City Planning Commission. In my very first meeting, several former city officials came to give public comment in support of a real estate project. The developer himself also addressed the commission and, rather than providing evidence in support of the particular part of the project he wanted approved, he asked for deference: "I would like to put before the commissioners that if they would trust me a little bit [...] This has been a great partnership with the city for a long number of years, and we want to continue that way."

That's what these real estate interests actually want: regulatory capture. They want city officials who do exactly as they ask. And it seems like that's what they've won in the new City Council majority: in the end, O'Brien didn't recuse himself from the Main Street vote.

And though I've said we should demand more of our elected officials, I don't expect that O'Brien will recuse himself from future votes involving Hackman Capital Partners. If he did recuse, what would be the point of all that money Hackman spent to get him elected in the first place?

Sincerely,

Stephen Jones