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Lafayette battalion chief charged with grand theft and misappropriation of public funds

By Nick Marnell



Former Battalion Chief Lou Manzo Photo Nick Marnell, Lamo archives

The Contra Costa County District Attorney's Office filed criminal charges in December against former fire district Battalion Chief Lou Manzo, who was charged with 12 counts of grand theft and misappropriation of public funds. Manzo had been assigned to Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Battalion 1, which includes Lafayette, Pleasant Hill and Walnut Creek, since 2014.

According to Steve Hill, ConFire public information officer, district leadership became aware of possible misconduct by Manzo in December 2018. Manzo was placed on administrative leave and a full internal investigation was ordered and conducted. When results of that investigation revealed apparent misconduct over five years, the results were immediately handed over to the district attorney for criminal investigation.

Former Deputy District Attorney Dodie Katague worked the case in 2019 and explained the basis of the charges.

"Manzo took advantage of his knowledge of ConFire's internal system to fraudulently misrepresent his hours and time off requests, in two separate fraud schemes," Katague said. In one scheme, Manzo would take vacation days but then later change his timecard to claim special pay for an extra assignment outside of his normal course of duties. Manzo would list a special assignment that he did not attend, or which did not happen on the day he said it did. "He would then go back and not claim the vacation time. He wanted to preserve his vacation time in relation to his pension," Katague said.

Manzo also claimed overtime pay for out-of-office work events that he never attended. A review was conducted of the GPS logs on his assigned work vehicle. "Witnesses confirmed that Manzo did not attend these events or was never near the event location," Katague said.

Hill said that after Manzo was placed on administrative leave Manzo subsequently applied for retirement. Manzo left the district in March after 29 years. "In total, the loss to ConFire is \$46,000 in direct salary payments and \$19,000 in costs incurred to cover shifts while Manzo was out of the office or claiming to be on special assignment," Hill said.

"The allegations involving Lou Manzo were limited to one individual and did not involve the public, other employees, or affect our services provided to the public," Fire Chief Lewis Broschard said in a statement. "As public servants, we rightfully hold ourselves to the highest standards of conduct, and the public expects no less. This isolated incident is not a reflection on the professionalism and conduct of all those serving in our organization who uphold the values of our agency and service to the public on a daily basis."

Manzo faces up to nine years in state prison. He is also subject to forfeiture of his pension, which will have to be recalculated without the fraudulent vacation days, according to Scott Alonso of the DA's office.

In December, Manzo pleaded not guilty to all charges. His lawyer, Christopher Varnell, did not respond to a request for comment.

Manzo's next court appearance is scheduled for Jan. 21.

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