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# Former County Parks and Recreation employee accused of embezzling \$26,000 in fuel

By **SARAH FAVOT** |

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Los Angeles County supervisors are seeking tighter controls on gas purchases after a former county Parks and Recreation Department employee was accused of embezzling about \$26,000 to fuel his own cars, according to a county audit.

Prosecutors charged Ralph Jesus Beltran, 59, with misappropriation of public funds and embezzlement, according to a spokeswoman from the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office. If convicted of the felony charges, Beltran faces four years in prison. He was arrested June 16 and is scheduled to be arraigned Aug. 17. He was released on a \$25,000 bond.

A Parks and Recreation Department spokesman said Friday that Beltran no longer works for the county.

Citing the audit, Supervisors Michael D. Antonovich and Hilda Solis want better oversight of the county's gas credit card program, known as Voyager Fuel Credit Cards.



A June 26 audit conducted by the county auditor-controller found that over a two-year period Beltran, a trails maintenance supervisor in the Department of Parks and Recreation, used a county credit card to fuel vehicles during days when he wasn't working, including weekends and holidays, and after his shift ended. The audit also showed that he was fueling vehicles that hadn't been driven that day or even within the month. The audit also showed that Beltran did not even drive a county vehicle home. The auditors referred the case to the District Attorney's Office. The charges were filed June 24.

"We are determined to confront any instance of fraud, misuse or wasting of public funds and are grateful for the review conducted by the Office of Auditor-Controller," Parks and Recreation Director Russ Guiney said in a statement. "As a result of these findings, we have already begun taking substantial steps to reduce the department's reliance on Voyager cards overall and strengthening control and oversight over their future use."

Beltran's fuel purchases were made between July 1, 2011, and April 30, 2013.

Several county departments use the Voyager Fuel Credit Card Program to fuel county vehicles at gas stations when a county fuel station cannot be accessed. The audit of the Department of Parks and Recreation found that the department spent about \$800,000 annually and about 335 employees were given credit cards. On average, each employee with a credit card spent about \$2,388 per year on fuel.

A 2011 study by Forbes found the average Angeleno consumes 680 gallons of gas each year, which at \$4 a gallon translates into about \$2,720 each year.

Antonovich and Solis said in their motion that there are policies in place that would have detected the alleged embezzlement by Beltran.

The supervisors will ask the county CEO and auditor to come up with an automated system to detect unauthorized use of the credit cards on weekends and holidays.

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Sarah Favot is an award-winning Los Angeles-based freelance writer. Most recently she was a data and investigative reporter at L.A. School Report, a non-profit education news website. Prior to that she was a staff writer for the L.A. Daily News covering county government. She is Vice President of the Los Angeles Chapter of The Society of Professional Journalists.



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