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Audit finds Sheriff's Department didn't get approval for helipad at Villanueva's home, contradicting his claims



A plot of privately owned land near Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva's home was leveled.
(Alene Tchekmedyan)

BY [ALENE TCHEKMEDYIAN](#) | STAFF WRITER
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The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department did not get proper approval last year to create an emergency helicopter landing pad on private property above Sheriff Alex Villanueva's home in La Habra Heights, [a county audit found](#).

The L.A. County auditor-controller released a report this week on the dispute, which was first [reported by The Times](#) in February 2021. It found that the Sheriff's Department did not receive permission from the city of La Habra Heights or the land owner, Southern California Gas Co.

The county's Department of Public Works and the California Department of Transportation told auditors that the construction of an emergency use helipad also requires a state heliport permit, which the Sheriff's Department did not seek.

Villanueva [insisted last year that the Sheriff's Department received approval](#) from the gas company to perform the work. The audit knocked down that claim, finding that "LASD could not provide any documentation of the approval or specifically identify the individuals who purportedly gave it, and SoCalGas expressly denied authorizing LASD to use or modify their property."

The audit said the city of La Habra Heights determined that "the grading activity at the property was not permitted or approved and allegedly did not comply with municipal codes related to grading permits and erosion prevention."

The controversy erupted in February of last year when L.A. County attorneys received a [cease-and-desist letter](#) from a gas company attorney demanding that the Sheriff's Department stop the unauthorized work on their property and that the county undo what was done to the land.

A few months earlier, workers for the gas company were on a plot of land the utility owns that sits above Villanueva's home. Some sheriff's officials approached and asked about the possibility of the department building a helicopter landing pad on the property.

The utility declined the request. Despite the rejection, the Sheriff's Department hired a crew to grade the dirt. An internal Sheriff's Department [memo written by a captain](#) claimed J. Isaac Gonzalez, who worked for the parent company of Southern California Gas Co. , and a site supervisor sheriff's officials knew only as "Tom" allegedly "gave verbal permission for the Sheriff's Department to enter the property and level the hill for an emergency landing zone."

Gonzalez is a former sheriff's deputy, and he and Villanueva worked at the East L.A. sheriff's station for several years in the 1990s.

The idea that a Sheriff's Department helicopter needed to be able to land near Villanueva's home to quickly extract him came about in August 2020, when department officials conducted a threat assessment to identify risks to the sheriff's safety. The review was done in the wake of "credible threats, doxing incidents, and protestors targeting law enforcement officials at their personal residences," according to a memo, which was written by a Sheriff's Department captain. Several issues were identified, including the need for a landing area.

According to the audit, the Sheriff's Department agreed to improve internal policies and controls, including by ensuring that it has obtained "legally sufficient written authorization from owners of private property prior to engaging in construction on such property." The agency also agreed to make sure it secures local government permits before starting any construction projects.

"The lack of a formal, written agreement with a private property owner prior to commencing construction work on their property is inconsistent with basic standards of due diligence and exposes the Department to liability," the audit said.

The Sheriff's Department released a statement to The Times, saying it "agrees with the Auditor-Controller's recommendation to improve its contracting process."