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Englander sentenced to 14 months in prison in L.A. City Hall corruption case



Former Los Angeles City Councilman Mitchell Englander and his wife, Jayne Englander, outside a federal courthouse in Los Angeles last March. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

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Former Los Angeles City Councilman Mitchell Englander was sentenced Monday to 14 months in prison and fined \$15,000 for lying to federal authorities about secret cash payments and a [debauched night](#) in Las Vegas provided by a businessman seeking introductions to developers.

U.S. District Judge John F. Walter said Englander had shown arrogance and greed in “brazenly” covering up his misconduct. He rejected Englander’s explanation that he’d simply been trying to protect his reputation.

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“There’s simply no adequate explanation as to how he totally lost his moral compass and committed this crime,” Walter said at a sentencing hearing conducted on Zoom.

Englander, 50, is the first person to be sentenced in a [sprawling federal investigation](#) into corruption at Los Angeles City Hall. He [pleaded guilty](#) in July to falsifying material facts, a felony.

As part of his plea deal, Englander admitted he lied to prosecutors and FBI agents repeatedly during three interviews in 2017 and 2018 about his dealings with the unnamed businessman. After the Vegas trip, the businessman became a government informant and secretly recorded conversations with the former councilman.

Englander, dressed in a dark suit and wearing a white mask at a conference table next to his lawyer, expressed remorse for his crime, saying his reputation had been “shattered.”

“I own what I did, and I take full responsibility, 100%,” he said. “I’ve hurt the very people I love the most.

“I apologize to the court, I apologize to the FBI, I apologize to the community, my former constituents. Most important, I apologize to my family — my wife, my daughters. I’ve hurt them.”

Monday’s sentencing concluded a precipitous fall for a politician who, less than three years ago, held the City Council’s No. 2 leadership post and served on its most powerful committees — those that make decisions on real estate development, public safety and the city budget. His [case](#) was part of a larger scandal that [sullied the reputation](#) of City Hall and undermined the public’s trust in how elected officials handled real estate projects reshaping the downtown skyline.

Former Los Angeles City Councilman Greig Smith, who employed Englander from 2003-11, said prison is “absolutely appropriate” in the case.

“Even though there’s nobody hurt or personally damaged by this, it’s something that destroyed confidence in government,” he said in an interview.

At the center of the ongoing investigation is former Councilman Jose Huizar, who is awaiting trial on bribery, racketeering, fraud, money laundering and other charges for his alleged shakedowns of developers seeking city approval for major downtown building projects. Also facing charges in that case is [Raymond Chan](#), a former deputy mayor to Mayor Eric Garcetti. Both men have pleaded not guilty.

Huizar’s former special assistant, [George Esparza](#), along with a [lobbyist](#) and two real estate consultants, have pleaded guilty to various federal crimes that implicate Huizar in the alleged pay-to-play schemes. Esparza [admitted](#) receiving lavish perks — trips to Vegas and Australia, expensive meals and escort services — from a developer looking to build a 77-story skyscraper, while also accepting \$8,000 to \$10,000 per month from the businessman who provided Englander with cash.

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The Englander case originated from a wiretap that captured Huizar and Esparza discussing the offering of prostitutes to Englander and Esparza in Las Vegas, assistant U.S. attorney Mack Jenkins told the judge Monday.

“That certainly got Englander on our radar,” the prosecutor said.

Prosecutors had recommended that Englander receive two years in prison, a \$45,500 fine and 300 hours of community service. Englander’s lawyer urged the judge to see his crime as an aberration and adopt the [more lenient recommendation](#) made by probation officials: no prison time, a \$9,500 fine and three years’ probation.

“His obituary will begin with this crime,” the lawyer, Janet Levine, said Monday at the hearing. “It will follow him wherever he goes.”

Supporters of Englander — family members, friends, former colleagues and others — also asked the judge for leniency, saying he is a good father with a history of public service who has repeatedly shown remorse. One letter came from actor Sean Penn, who described how he became friends with Englander in the wake of the Woolsey fire in 2018.

“I know none of the details of Mitch’s case,” Penn wrote to the court. “Only that he is contrite and embarrassed.”

The judge said he’d received an “overwhelming” collection of letters vouching for Englander and was most swayed by the ones sent by his wife, Jayne, and daughters, Lauren and Lindsey. He also recognized Englander had suffered hardship as a child, including his father’s abandonment of the family and a bout of homelessness.

Englander told the court he’d been through “horrific tragedies.”

“This is by far the worst,” he said. “Because I created it, and I hurt the very people I love the most.”

Englander served on the council from 2011-18, representing such northwest San Fernando Valley neighborhoods as Chatsworth, Northridge, Porter Ranch and Granada Hills. He was the lone Republican on the council when he [resigned](#) to take a job at Oak View Group, a sports and entertainment firm.

At the time, Englander called the new job a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” — and did not reveal he was facing a criminal investigation.

Known at City Hall for his tart, sometimes dismissive remarks, Englander was more conservative than most of his colleagues. He cast the sole vote against [raising the city’s minimum wage](#) in 2015. A reserve police officer, Englander supported body cameras for cops, a crackdown on illegal street racing and a proposal to force city officials to forfeit their pensions if they were [found guilty of felonies](#).

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In the criminal case, Englander admitted to lying repeatedly about his dealings with a businessman peddling smart home electronics, which can adjust air-conditioning, lighting and window shades from a phone. The businessman wanted Englander to introduce him to developers who might buy his products, prosecutors said.

In June 2017, the businessman spent tens of thousands of dollars on Las Vegas hotel rooms, meals, nightclub bar tabs and escorts for Englander, Esparza and others, court records show. Councilman John Lee, who succeeded Englander in 2019 and was Englander's former chief of staff, confirmed last year that he went on the trip.

In court filings, prosecutors said the businessman sent an escort to Englander's hotel room but that it was unknown whether Englander "accepted those services."

In his plea agreement, Englander admitted taking \$10,000 in cash in Las Vegas from the businessman, then \$5,000 from him a few weeks later at the Morongo Casino Resort and Spa near Palm Springs. The absence of cameras in the restrooms led Englander to think he wouldn't get caught, prosecutors said.

Days later, Englander invited the businessman to a lunch with a developer so he could pitch his smart home products to the builder, prosecutors said.

Englander learned of the FBI investigation into the Vegas trip later that summer. He then used an encrypted messaging app to tell the businessman he wanted to reimburse some of the Las Vegas expenses, court records show.

Shortly after the FBI asked Englander to come in for an interview, he sent the businessman a check that he back-dated to look as if it had been paid before he'd heard from the FBI, Englander admitted in his guilty plea.

In addition to recording his conversations with Englander, the businessman used an FBI phone to snap photos of encrypted texts that Englander sent before the messaging app automatically deleted them, according to prosecutors.

In his first interview with FBI agents, Englander falsely stated that he hadn't told the businessman about the FBI's investigation. Months later, Englander urged the businessman to falsely deny to the FBI that they were talking about the investigation. "You and I never had a conversation," he told him in a recorded conversation.

Englander asked the businessman to tell agents that he'd repeatedly tried to reimburse him for his Las Vegas hotel room and dinner, according to his plea agreement. He also instructed the businessman not to tell the FBI anything about sending a "massage lady" to his Vegas hotel room.

In his second FBI interview, Englander lied again about not discussing the investigation with the businessman. He also falsely stated that he'd taken no benefits from him other than a hotel room, dinner and drinks.

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In February 2018, Englander met with the businessman in his car. As they drove in circles around downtown L.A., Englander again urged the businessman to lie to the FBI about providing escorts in Las Vegas and about texting on the encrypted app, court records show.

Englander's final interview with federal investigators took place on Dec. 31, 2018, his last day on the City Council. During that session, he continued with his deceptions, lying about the scope of the benefits the businessman had provided in Las Vegas and saying nothing about the "massage lady" or the cash handoff in the bathroom.

Englander must surrender June 1 to start serving time at the federal prison in Lompoc. However, the judge left open the possibility that the date could be postponed due to safety issues stemming from the spread of COVID-19.