

Ald. George Cardenas (12th) rents ward office from family

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ABSTRACT

The issue came to light after the Tribune this week published an analysis of expense-account spending by aldermen in 2008, the first year after Mayor Richard Daley agreed to double the funds to up to \$73,280 for each of the 50 City Council members.

FULL TEXT

Aug. 21—A Chicago alderman is using his taxpayer-funded expense account to rent a ward office in a building he owns with relatives, but he said Thursday that he would end the practice if it violates ethics rules.

Ald. George Cardenas (12th) initially told the Tribune he didn't see a problem with the arrangement, in which he paid \$17,120 in 2008 to the Cardenas-family company. But after being questioned by reporters, he said he plans to sell his interest in the company.

"There's no reason to be [in the company] if it's going to cause me headaches," he said. "I do everything aboveboard."

Cardenas also said he was seeking an opinion from the city's Ethics Board on whether he can rent from relatives, and if it is not allowed, he will move his aldermanic office out of the building.

The ordinance governing aldermanic expense accounts prohibits the spending of expense funds for "the direct monetary benefit of any alderman or any of his or her relatives."

Burton Odelson, an attorney who specializes in municipal law, said local and state law appears to prohibit public officials from paying rent to themselves.

"If he was my client, I'd say, 'No way,'" Odelson said.

The issue came to light after the Tribune this week published an analysis of expense-account spending by aldermen in 2008, the first year after Mayor Richard Daley agreed to double the funds to up to \$73,280 for each of the 50 City Council members. Spending practices varied greatly, but the analysis revealed some aldermen used the money to lease expensive vehicles, rent downtown parking spaces and hire relatives or political allies.

The expense-account law requires aldermen to spend the money on costs related to official duties. But it also provides wide discretion and little oversight.

Daley said Thursday that he would not judge which expenses are appropriate. "They have to be accountable. They

have to be transparent," Daley said of aldermen. "It's up to them basically to tell the people what they're spending for."

The alderman said he moved his ward office to the building at 2454-60 W. 38th St. shortly after he and his relatives bought it in February 2007. They paid \$715,000 for the three-story building, according to Cook County records.

Cardenas said he has a minority stake in the firm and got involved in order to help the company get credit approval for the loan needed to buy the property. He is one of seven owners of the limited liability corporation run by his brother, state records indicate. Cardenas listed a financial interest in the property on his economic disclosure statements for the last two years.

Jennifer Hoyle, a spokesman for the city Law Department, said city attorneys had to research the issue and could not immediately say whether using expense funds to pay a family-owned company is appropriate.

Cook County Commissioner Joseph Mario Moreno (D- Chicago), who was renting his office in the building before the Cardenas family bought it, continues to rent space there.

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