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Accountants

Christine Boulton-Hunyady alleges she was fired after refusing to approve changes to her reports she said were unwarranted.

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San Diego City Hall. (John Gastaldo/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

By Jeff McDonald, The San Diego Union-Tribune (TNS)

A longtime accountant for the San Diego City Treasurer's Office who says she was fired after refusing to sign off on findings her bosses changed has agreed to accept hundreds of thousands of dollars from taxpayers to settle her lawsuit.

Christine Boulton-Hunyady spent 27 years with the city of San Diego, during which

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The lawyer for Boulton-Hunyady said her firing has denied the city decades of experience and a valuable asset.

“What these retaliation and whistleblower cases show is that when an employee makes their bosses look bad by calling out violations of the law, the bosses are going to find ways to stop the bad publicity,” said attorney Jim Mitchell, who represented Boulton-Hunyady.

“The bottom line here is that the city lost a top-notch auditor who truly cared about protecting the public,” Mitchell added.

According to the San Diego Superior Court lawsuit filed in March 2022, Boulton-Hunyady identified more than \$51 million in savings over her 27 years as a city employee and \$6 million in additional revenue.

She was about a year and a half shy of entering a lucrative deferred-retirement program for city workers when she was fired, the complaint alleges.

“The city terminated Boulton-Hunyady in retaliation for her reporting what she reasonably believed through audits she conducted was the city’s massive monetary losses in revenue from franchisees, permittees and lessees,” the lawsuit said.

The complaint said the city relied on improper audit procedures, tolerated unwarranted delays in audits and failed to audit all of its business operators, and that she was fired for refusing to violate federal and local rules that govern audits.

The Treasurer’s Office is responsible for managing various fees and permits across the city, including those for short-term vacation rentals, cannabis licenses, parking services, delinquent accounts and others.

In her lawsuit, Boulton-Hunyady said she repeatedly received positive performance

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“Another audit revealed that another city franchisee owed the city franchise fees of \$248,545.87, which included \$37,329 in prior audit findings that were never invoiced and disallowed credits and two years went unaudited,” the legal complaint asserted.

On at least two occasions, Boulton-Hunyady's supervisors changed her findings and directed her to sign off on the changes even though they did not comport with auditing practices, the lawsuit said.

“Boulton-Hunyady refused to sign off on the two edited recommendations because to do so would have violated the city's generally accepted accounting/audit standards and the audit standards required by the Federal Government Accountability Office, Yellow Book,” it said.

The “Yellow Book” is the U.S. Government Accountability Office's volume of established auditing practices.

Allegations that local public officials have retaliated against workers who have raised concern about their offices' practices are not new.

Late last year, a San Diego Association of Governments finance official sued the regional planning agency for retaliation after she was fired. She said she had raised questions about her bosses' handling of a faulty toll-collecting system.

Two years ago, a former deputy San Diego city attorney won almost \$6 million in damages and fees in a wrongful termination case she filed against the city, saying she had been fired on a pretext after refusing to prosecute cases she felt were politically motivated.

And in 2021, the city of San Diego agreed to pay a former Public Utilities Department deputy director \$125,000 plus six months' pay after she was terminated. She had

accused her supervisors of diverting more than \$1 million from the water fund to pay

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