



Auditor says Rosemary Vinci's failure to disclose felony record broke no law

Posted by [Mark Puente and Henry J. Gomez](#) May 18, 2008

Rosemary Vinci will keep her \$48,000-a-year job with Cuyahoga County Auditor Frank Russo despite an old felony conviction that the former strip club manager did not disclose on her application for the position.

Vinci, 50, has not been to work since questions about her duties and qualifications were raised a month ago. She is on paid medical leave, and Russo doesn't know when she will return.

"She's a good person," Russo said. "She committed no crime while on our payroll."

The politically connected Vinci was found guilty in 1985 of theft and forgery in Broward County, Fla., records show. She joined Russo's office in 2006 as an office assistant making \$40,000 a year and soon was promoted to municipal liaison and a \$48,000 annual salary.

Determining who Vinci's boss is and what job she performs isn't easy.

Vinci is on the auditor's payroll. But several county employees, including one in Russo's office, said she splits her time between the auditor and the three county commissioners.

Vinci is supposed to spend much of her time representing the county at Cleveland City Hall, but she has not logged any time there in 2008, according to her timesheets.

One project Vinci pursued at City Hall in 2006 helped La Copa, a controversial West Side bar. Vinci said last month that she lobbied city officials on behalf of La Copa while on county time. City Councilman Joe Santiago, whose campaign Vinci managed, helped the bar obtain a liquor license.

The bar, often cited by police, is managed by a convicted heroin dealer, records show.

Russo said he was unaware of Vinci's support of La Copa on county time. The work, he added, might have been justified if a councilman asked for her help.

"You can't say whether it's right or wrong," Russo said.

Russo, who said Vinci works for him only, was surprised last month to learn about her Florida conviction from a Plain Dealer reporter. He sought legal guidance from the county prosecutor's office. A lawyer there told Russo it was his call whether to fire her.

Vinci, who left much of her job application blank, did not check "yes" or "no" in the section that asks whether she had any felony convictions. But Russo is confident she broke no law by not answering, and he decided she should keep her job.

"I'm disappointed that she didn't answer the question," Russo said.

Vinci familiar with controversy

Vinci's ascension in local politics has been unusual. For years she managed the now-closed Tiffany's, a high-end strip club on the west bank of the Flats.

She also co-hosted a morning show on WJMO FM in the early 1990s with an on-air name of Madam LaRue. The station fired Vinci in 1992 after she orchestrated a stunt in which women faked orgasms on air.

Two years later, Vinci made headlines again when she vowed to guard with a shotgun a piece of property her mother owned on Columbus Road in the Flats.

The Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority wanted to take the land through eminent domain and make way for its new Waterfront rail line. RTA initially offered \$70,000 for the land. Vinci's mother, now deceased, eventually sold to RTA for about \$500,000.

Vinci's holdout propelled her as an activist in her Duck Island neighborhood, nestled between Tremont and Ohio City and a short walk from the West Side Market. Vinci owns nine adjoining parcels of land near her home on West 18th Street.

Russo said he has known Vinci for the last 10 or 15 years. He met her through her work with community organizations such as the Flats Oxbow Association and Tremont West Development Corp. Vinci once served as president of Tremont West's board.

He recalled that Vinci repeatedly asked him for a job over the years.

Two years ago, he obliged. He said he hired Vinci after Mayor Frank Jackson took office, because of her connections at City Hall. Vinci had close relationships with Councilman Joe Cimperman and Emily Lipovan, then the council's clerk, Russo said.

She also was fresh off managing Joe Santiago's successful council campaign.

"She knows a lot of councilmen," Russo said.

The auditor maintains that Vinci does good work, though he and his top deputy, Samir Mohammad, were unable in a recent interview to specify more than a few of her projects.

Vinci said last month that she works for Russo and County Commissioner

Dimora and speaks for both on behalf of the county to Cleveland City Council members. The two other county commissioners deny that she works for them. Dimora had two Plain Dealer reporters ejected from a public meeting after he refused to answer questions about Vinci.

Vinci refused a request for another interview.

Russo said all his employees do some work for the commissioners' office related to health, children issues or county outreach programs.

"We all work together," Russo said. "She is a harmless employee. She does a good job."

City Hall liaison hard to track down

In Russo's estimation, Vinci's primary job qualification is that she knows a lot of players at City Hall. But interviews with more than half of Cleveland's council members suggest Vinci has only a handful of close contacts there.

Others know Vinci only as a political insider, not as a municipal liaison.

"I can't remember seeing that lady over here," Councilman Zack Reed said last month. "Of course, I know her for being at every Democratic Party function we have."

Vinci's county timesheets tell a different story. On them, she indicated she spent nearly 15 weeks over two years working on behalf of county officials at City Hall. The timesheets do not provide a description of what she does at a particular location each day.

Lipovan, who left the clerk's job in December, vouched for the hours Vinci said she logged at City Hall. "It doesn't sound crazy," Lipovan said in an interview last month.

Vinci worked with council members on "big-picture stuff" such as developer Scott Wolstein's mixed-use real estate project on the east bank of the Flats, Lipovan said.

But more recent timesheets show Vinci has logged no hours at City Hall since Lipovan left. New Clerk Patricia Britt, who was a councilwoman for 12 years, said she doesn't know Vinci.

"Maybe by sight I would," Britt said. She added that Vinci may work with individual council members without notifying the clerk's office.

Russo and Mohammad could not explain why the liaison between their office and City Council has apparently logged no hours at City Hall since the first of the year.

"I have no idea," Russo said. "I'm not aware that she's not over there. So, I'm assuming everything's going fine."

Plain Dealer reporter Joe Guillen and news researcher Jo Ellen Corrigan contributed to this story.