

Fresno Unified trustees must hand over electronic devices to feds

By Mackenzie Mays
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Fresno Unified trustees must turn over any electronic devices used to conduct school business as part of an ongoing federal investigation of the district's no-bid construction projects.

Superintendent Michael Hanson informed trustees in an email Monday that they, too, are subject to the demands of a grand jury [subpoena](#) served to the district in August.

Fresno Unified School District Trustee Brooke Ashjian. ERIC PAUL ZAMORA ezamora@fresnobee.com

The subpoena does not target any district officials by name, but asks for a wide range of financial and personal documents related to the district's dealings with specific contractors dating back to 2009.

The subpoena focuses on Fresno Unified's "[lease-leaseback](#)" deals – a controversial financing method that circumvents the traditional bidding process.



"I need to let you know that, at this point, the district has completed the collection of all devices connected to the document custodians identified by the subpoena, with the exception of the Board of Trustees. Given that the board ultimately deliberated and voted on all contractual items related to the lease-leaseback construction delivery method in an official capacity for the district, you also fall under the jurisdiction of the subpoena," Hanson said in the email.

Trustees' district-issued iPads and any other personal devices used to conduct district business are subject to review. "If the district has provided you with any type of electronic tool for your use, these would be subject to imaging," the email said. "Additionally, if you have a personal communication or technology tool that was used in a manner to conduct district business ... those also would be subject to disclosure."

"All along, it has been our intent to fully comply with the mandates of the subpoena and to provide full transparency," Hanson added.

On Monday, Trustees Christopher De La Cerda, Brooke Ashjian and Luis Chavez all pointed out that they were not elected to the board until after some of the contracts in question were signed.

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Fresno Unified Superintendent Michael Hanson

in an email to trustees

Ashjian said Hanson's statement in the email about the board's role in the contracts is "a complete misstatement of facts," pointing to controversy over the district's use of [pre-construction contracts](#). Harris Construction, the local developer that has built most of Fresno Unified's campuses in recent years, was promised the \$37 million Gaston Middle School project several months before it was officially picked by the board as the builder. The firm agreed to provide consulting services for free in exchange for winning the project.

“The board did not ‘ultimately deliberate’ or vote on pre-construction services. The reason why we’re in this mess is because the district allowed the contractor to have the job before he submitted it to the board. So we didn’t do this. The administration gave the contract – the board didn’t,” Ashjian said.

Ashjian also took issue with another line in the email: Hanson says he is serving as the district’s lead on the collection of documents for the subpoena, working with [Discovia](#) – a San-Francisco-based firm the board recently hired to assist it in complying with the investigation’s demands.

“Our CEO, which got us into these questionable circumstances, is also the lead on this collection of documents. How does that happen?” he said.

De La Cerda said he will do what he needs to do to help the investigation continue.

“I’m more than willing to comply with whatever the inquiry requires us to. I’m not concerned – partly because I wasn’t there when a lot of this took place,” he said.

Chavez said it’s no surprise that the board members are being looked at as well, and that he hopes the investigation casts a broad net.

“It was expected, and I’m 100 percent more than happy to do it,” he said.

Trustee Valerie Davis also said she is willing to comply with the investigation. Other trustees could not be reached.

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