

January 14, 2026

State of California
Fair Political Practices Commission
1102 Q St. Suite 3050
Sacramento, CA. 95814
ATTN: FPPC Commissioners

SUBJECT: Request Expediting Conflict of Interest Investigation of Whittier Mayor Joe Vinatieri,
FPPC Case No: 2024-00927

Dear Chairman Silver and Commissioners:

The City of Whittier will hold an election on April 14, 2026 for Mayor and Council Members in Districts 2 and 4. Mayor Joe Vinatieri, an incumbent on the Whittier City Council for the past 20 years and citywide Mayor since 2016, is again seeking re-election. A cloud of controversy hangs over his re-election campaign due to the FPPC's ongoing investigation of a sworn complaint allegation of Conflict of Interest against him, Case No: 2024-00927. I filed that sworn complaint on June 17, 2024; the FPPC Enforcement Division opened the investigation on Sept. 10, 2024 (copy of notification and wording of sworn complaint attached).

The sworn complaint alleges that Mayor Vinatieri did not recuse himself from voting on two City Council agenda items on the controversial, \$20+ million Uptown Whittier Greenleaf Promenade Plan despite owning a business located within the project area. The background and evidence substantiating the allegation is included in the 2 ½ pages of the attached sworn complaint. Upon review, please note that the complaint was filed a day prior to the Whittier City Council's final meeting/study session regarding this issue on June 18, 2024. The City Council voted 3-1 to proceed with the Promenade Plan that calls for removal of ALL the trees on three blocks of Greenleaf Av in the heart of Uptown. The Whittier City Council's initial vote on Dec. 12, 2023 to proceed with that Promenade design option triggered public outrage regarding their decision to remove the mature, shady tree canopy. As described in the complaint, "the strength of the public outcry is reflected by 4,010+ signatures on a petition to Save our Trees in Uptown Whittier..." Public outrage has intensified over the past two years as reflected by 8,079 signatures currently on that petition, and a lawsuit filed by The Whittier Conservancy (case number: 24STCP03966). That lawsuit is scheduled for trial next month in L.A. County Superior Court.

On several occasions since the FPPC opened this case, I called and emailed the assigned Political Reform Consultant to ask for an update, including inquiring about sending a letter to the Investigation team in hopes of increasing the pace of the investigation. I was told that it would have no impact. As Commissioners, I am bringing the timing of this matter to your personal attention because, in my experience when serving as L.A. County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk, when highly-sensitive issues arose, I was occasionally frustrated that staff had not brought the matter to my attention for resolution before it erupted.

This ongoing tree controversy is a key issue in the campaign for Whittier Mayor in the upcoming April 14, 2026 City Election. Completion of this FPPC investigation prior to the election would be informative for Whittier voters, and should be welcomed by Mr. Vinatieri as well in order to finalize this matter.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Conny B. McCormack".

Conny McCormack
Former L.A. Co. Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk (Ret.)
29-year resident of Whittier
Founder, www.saveoutreeswhittier.com

cc: Galena West, FPPC Executive Director
Attachments (2)

WORDING OF FPPC SWORN COMPLAINT AGAINST JOE VINATIERI

This complaint alleges a violation of FPPC conflict of interest provisions by Joe Vinatieri, Mayor of the City of Whittier, CA. On August 22, 2023, Mayor Vinatieri participated in a vote of the City Council that he should have recused himself from voting on. His “aye” vote that day was on an agenda item for the controversial Uptown Streetscape and Greenleaf Promenade plan to expand the geographic scope of the project’s size by 51% in the central core of Whittier’s Uptown business district¹. The controversy currently raging in Whittier is described below under “Background”, including Mayor Vinatieri’s pivotal role.

In June 2021, Mayor Joe Vinatieri opened Auntie’s restaurant located within the area designated for the Uptown Streetscape Greenleaf Promenade plan in the central business district of Whittier. For several years prior to that date, the City Council, with Mayor Joe Vinatieri’s participation, held discussions at multiple meetings about spending millions of dollars to revitalize Uptown Whittier, with the goal of bringing in more money to businesses in the Uptown core. Those discussions evolved from a proposed expenditure of \$3.5-\$3.8 million for infrastructure improvements for a one block area of Greenleaf Av in 2019 called the Gardens of Uptown Whittier, to a three-block area of Greenleaf Av early in 2021 called the Uptown Streetscape Greenleaf Promenade plan encompassing the area of Auntie’s restaurant located at 6506 Greenleaf Av. The City’s cost estimate for the Uptown Streetscape Greenleaf Promenade plan is \$20 million, due to expansion of the project and the addition of a new water main on those three blocks of Greenleaf Av (cost of new water main is estimated at \$6-8 million.)

Between June 2021 and August 22, 2023, the City Council conducted several meetings where the agendas included minor aspects of the Greenleaf Promenade plan in which Joe Vinatieri recused himself, stating he has a conflict of interest due to his business located within that area, Auntie’s restaurant. But on August 22, 2023, Item 12K entitled “Greenleaf Promenade Design Services” was placed on the Consent Calendar described as an \$84,500 amendment to SWA project consultants to increase the project’s design. At that meeting, Mayor Joe Vinatieri asked if any member of the Council wished to recuse themselves on any of the Consent Calendar items or pull any of those items for discussion. No one did. The City Council, including Mayor Vinatieri, voted in favor. The city manager in consultation with the mayor makes the determination about which items are placed on the Consent Calendar for City Council meetings.

Background: Public outcry over the Greenleaf Promenade plan exploded in January 2024 after residents found out that the City Council voted on Dec 12, 2023 to approve an “amended” version of the Uptown Streetscape Greenleaf Promenade plan². This version involves chopping down ALL the trees at once on those three blocks of Greenleaf Av, including the iconic canopy of ficus trees, instead of gradually phasing-in tree removal and replacement to retain the tree

¹ Videotapes of all City Council meetings are available under Meeting Agendas at www.cityofwhittier.org

² On a 3-0 vote; Mayor Vinatieri recused and former Council member Jessica Martinez was absent.

canopy as described in Whittier's existing ordinances (Uptown Specific Plan, 2008 & rev. 2014, and Tree Protection Ordinance, 2016). For years, Mayor Joe Vinatieri has publicly expressed his extreme dislike of ficus trees and his desire to remove them due to roots uplifting sidewalks.

Because of public outrage at the impending tree massacre, first expressed at the Jan. 23, 2024 City Council meeting following the Dec. 12, 2023 vote, the City Council put the Greenleaf Promenade Project on "pause" to further study the issue. That "pause" has now extended for six months, encompassing two special City Council meetings/study sessions devoted solely to this issue, held on Feb. 20 and April 30, 2024, with a third (and expected final) city council meeting/study session on this issue scheduled for June 18, 2024.³

During the past six months, residents have expressed their support for repairing and replacing uplifted sidewalks and other improvements to the City's infrastructure, while vociferously opposing removal of Uptown Whittier's iconic, shady canopy of ficus trees, clearly stating these goals are NOT mutually exclusive. Residents are advocating for a re-design of the Uptown Streetscape Greenleaf Promenade plan to meet both goals. The strength of the public outcry is reflected by 4,010+ signatures, and growing daily, on a petition to Save our Trees in Uptown Whittier⁴, overflowing crowds at the special City Council meetings on Feb. 20 and April 30, hundreds of letters sent to the City Council, and a Rally to Save Our Trees⁵. Media coverage of this tree controversy includes widespread TV and print, including the L A Times.⁶

Mayor Vinatieri has publicly stated for years his desire to rid the City of ficus trees. As the long-time mayor and only citywide elected official, he is influential in shaping opinions and votes of other Council members. He is a driving force and key advocate for the current design of the Uptown Streetscape Greenleaf Promenade plan that calls for removal of ALL the trees on the designated three blocks of Greenleaf Av, including 83 ficus trees, replacing them with much smaller trees. Such action would eliminate historic Uptown Whittier's most recognizable and distinctive feature, the magnificent tree canopy.

³ The Agenda for the June 18 City Council meeting/study session includes multiple attachments (www.cityofwhittier.org, Agendas) including a 17-page document prepared by the City Manager that reveals his expected recommendation to move ahead with the Greenleaf Promenade plan as approved by the City Council on Dec. 12, 2023, including removing all of the mature trees on those three blocks of Greenleaf Av.

⁴ See Petition at <https://chnng.it/fFN5cS8yVP>

⁵ I organized the Rally to Save Our Trees held on March 16, 2024 - KCAL Ch9 coverage of the Rally and other key information available at www.saveourtreeswhittier.org. Additionally, I wrote letters to the City Council opposing the planned tree destruction, proposed compromise alternative solutions, and presented Public Comment testimony to the City Council at all of their meetings since this controversy erupted: letters dated Feb. 5, 20, 27, Mar. 26, April 30, May 7, 28, and June 11. Several of these letters are included at www.saveourtreeswhittier.org. All are available at www.cityofwhittier.org on City Council agendas under submitted public comments.

⁶ LA Times, June 4 (online at <https://www.latimes.com/environment/story/2024-06-04/uptown-whittier-redevelopment-plan-could-remove-83-ficus-trees>) and June 6 (hard copy paper), KCAL (Ch9) March 16 <https://www.cbsnews.com/losangeles/video/protestors-march-to-save-the-trees-in-whittier/>, KTLA (Ch5) June 4 <https://ktla.com/video/whittier-residents-outraged-over-plan-to-remove-ficus-trees-in-historic-district/9756130/>, ABC(Ch7) June 6 <https://abc7.com/post/whittier-residents-say-project-would-cut-down-100/14919776/> and multiple articles in the Whittier Daily News (WDN) beginning Feb 1 (WDN articles also available at www.saveourtreeswhittier.com)

⁷Videotape of meeting available at www.cityofwhittier.org under Recent Agendas.

While recusing himself from many City Council meeting discussions and votes on this project, Mayor Vinatieri also voted “aye” when he should have recused himself regarding Item 12G on the Consent Calendar at the City Council meeting on Feb. 27, 2024. Although the title of that agenda item, FY 2024-25 Federal Community Benefit Project Requests, did not specifically mention the Greenleaf Promenade plan, the one-page staff report attached to the item clarifies the request encompasses “the Greenleaf Av Water Project (Part of Streetscape Project)”.

Most recently, during the Public Comment period at the June 11, 2024 City Council meeting, many Whittier residents spoke passionately to advocate saving the existing ficus tree canopy in Uptown, including a speaker who expressed criticism of Mayor Vinatieri’s involvement despite supposedly recusing himself.ⁱ At the very end of that City Council meeting, Mayor Vinatieri rebuked public speakers stating he follows the law and has not exhibited a conflict of interest. The examples cited above refute his statement and form the basis for this FPPC conflict of interest complaint.

Attachment No.2



STATE OF CALIFORNIA FAIR POLITICAL PRACTICES COMMISSION

1102 Q Street • Suite 3050 • Sacramento, CA 95814-2329

September 10, 2024

Conny McCormack

Via email: connymccormack@gmail.com

RE: FPPC Case No. 2024-00927; Joe Vinatieri

Dear Conny McCormack:

This letter is to notify you that the Enforcement Division of the Fair Political Practices Commission will investigate the allegation(s), under the jurisdiction of the Commission, of the sworn complaint you submitted in the above-referenced matter. You will next receive notification from us upon final disposition of the case. However, please be advised that at this time we have not made any determination about the validity of the allegation(s) you have made or about the culpability, if any, of the person(s) you identify in your complaint.

Thank you for taking the time to bring this matter to our attention. If you have any questions regarding this letter, please contact Shelby Pearce at 279-237-5972 or spearce@fppc.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

James M. Lindsay

James M. Lindsay

Chief, Enforcement Division

JML: sp

cc: Keith Collins o/b/o Joe Vinatieri