



EAST COUNTY

Judge extends restraining order against Lemon Grove council member amid multiple misconduct accusations



Lemon Grove Councilmember Liana LeBaron listens to public speakers during a city council meeting in September 2022. (Adriana Heldiz/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Records show a third person appears to have also requested protection from Liana LeBaron in recent years

BY BLAKE NELSON | STAFF REPORTER

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EL CAJON — A judge has extended a restraining order against a member of the Lemon Grove City Council, meaning Liana LeBaron will continue to be restricted from interacting with one of her colleagues outside of public meetings for at least the next several months.

LeBaron had been accused of harassing a fellow council member, Jennifer Mendoza, one of several people who've said they've been mistreated by the outspoken and controversial leader.

LeBaron is already facing a restraining order from her husband, who's said she assaulted him. It also appears a third person has filed two requests in recent years for a court's protection against LeBaron, although neither were granted.

During a hearing Monday in El Cajon, Superior Court Judge Peter A. Lynch said LeBaron must stay away from Mendoza for another 90 days.

“The court is concerned about the conduct that has been described,” he said.

Lynch did say the two could be near each other at “official public meetings,” in addition to the council gatherings that were already allowed.

If nothing bad happens ahead of the next hearing Aug. 14, the judge said he'd likely end the order.

LeBaron said she'd never intended to harass her colleague and has denied previous accusations of violence, bullying and racism, saying she's the real victim of a widespread effort to discriminate against her.

One of her attorneys, Cory Briggs, accused Mendoza of “embellishing, if not flat out lying” about numerous encounters. “You don't have any incidents that would make a reasonable person be upset or concerned about his or her safety,” he told the judge.

The brewery

The two council members differed repeatedly Monday about whether they'd engaged in civil discourse or volatile abuse.

A central moment of the case occurred in February, when each woman said they'd been intimidated by the other during a party in Lemon Grove's 13 Point Brewing.

Both agreed LeBaron had approached Mendoza, who was sitting at a table, and leaned toward her ear.

But LeBaron said she was just getting close amid loud music to say hello, while Mendoza said LeBaron whispered, "I'm glad I have so much control over you."

Mendoza immediately stood up and pushed back her chair, which LeBaron said hit her knees and toes.

LeBaron quickly called the sheriff's department to say she'd "been assaulted."

"It is not ok to use objects to hit people," LeBaron told the judge. "At the brewery, it was her metal chair. Next it could be her purse that she hits me with, next it could be a golf club."

Deputies investigated and determined there was "no probable cause" of assault and battery, according to a law enforcement summary of the event obtained through a records request.

A spokesperson for the sheriff's department declined to comment on the specific incident but said a lack of probable cause wasn't the same thing as someone misrepresenting what happened.

“A person reporting what they believe is a crime and a deputy saying there is no crime” doesn’t “necessarily mean it’s a false report,” Lt. Amber Baggs wrote in an email.

Other exchanges

The judge essentially threw out the question of whether LeBaron had been justified in calling for help, as well as several incidents that either happened during a council meeting or amid campaign events ahead of last year’s election.

Briggs had called many of those exchanges “constitutionally protected activity.”

The list included a moment when LeBaron allegedly stopped her vehicle in front of Mendoza’s home to honk her horn and block the street.

Eight people signed forms saying that had likely occurred during a “car parade” promoting several people on the ballot, and that any vehicles lingering near Mendoza was “completely coincidental” as they’d driven by a number of homes.

Those witnesses included Stephanie Klein and Jessyka Heredia, former council candidates who were endorsed by LeBaron, as well as Teresa Rosiak Proffit, who previously ran for mayor and has been a vocal critic of city leadership.

LeBaron added that she’s never yelled at Mendoza and wrote in a court filing, “I have never used profane language to insult or threaten her.”

However, LeBaron has previously and publicly acknowledged using some profanity, once calling the rest of the council “a bunch of f---ing buffoons.”

Mendoza said LeBaron has shouted at her and called her a “f---ing b---.”

“Every time I see a black Jeep, I’m — it’s like my heart starts racing,” Mendoza told the judge, referring to a vehicle LeBaron has driven. “I feel like I’ve got PTSD.”

More restraining order requests

Furthermore, a middle-aged woman who lives in Lemon Grove, Neri Garcia, has filed two restraining order requests against a Liana Marez.

Garcia said in a recent phone interview that Marez was the same person as LeBaron. Garcia’s partner, Mark Marez, later confirmed that and affirmed that LeBaron is his daughter. The addresses Garcia gave for Marez also correspond with where LeBaron has lived, according to public records.

In late 2017, Garcia wrote to the court that after she started dating Marez’s father, Marez had “stalked” her, called her names, “banged on my bedroom door” and “threw trash everywhere,” and that similar behavior had happened for days.

A court official denied the request, saying there wasn’t enough evidence, and nobody appeared at a hearing scheduled for Dec. 21 of that year, records show. The request was dismissed “without prejudice,” meaning it could be brought back.

Last year, Garcia again asked a court for protection, saying Marez had stolen her mail, scratched her car and let air out of her tires, among other alleged harassment.

Garcia was denied again for not having proof.

In an emotional interview, Garcia said LeBaron has followed her while driving and has shouted profanity at her, including calling her a “f---ing b---.” Garcia now sleeps with her bedroom door locked out of fear.

“I don’t trust her,” Garcia said.

When approached by a reporter before Monday's hearing, LeBaron directed questions to Briggs, her attorney.

Briggs shook his head when asked if he was familiar with Garcia's accusations and declined an offer to have a summary emailed to him.



Blake Nelson