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# Former mayor criticizes \$200,000 Highland Park investigation

By **John P. Huston**, **Chicago Tribune** reporter

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**O**fficials say an internal audit of [Highland Park's](#) city operations was launched last year to investigate alleged criminal activity, but none was ever found. Meanwhile, the price tag of the legal firm conducting the probe had ballooned to nearly \$200,000.

Now, former Highland Park Mayor Mike Belsky says the money spent on hiring law firm Sidley Austin LLP could have been put to better use elsewhere.

"They probably could have put some of that to keep the (Highland Park) Theater open and keep 50,000 people per year coming into downtown," said Belsky, who left office a year before the investigation was launched. "Right now it's dormant, and I think it's hurting the downtown economy."

Mayor Nancy Rotering defended the report's cost, and said it brought several important safety issues to light, such as a faulty sprinkler system at the city's Port Clinton parking garage. It also prompted the May closing of the city-owned Highland Park Theater.

Rotering has been critical of the theater purchase under Belsky's watch. She fired back at her predecessor's criticism of the investigation's cost.

"To put a price on people's safety is unconscionable," Rotering said. "When it's a matter of looking into the operations of the city and addressing questions of whether wrongdoing has occurred, it was money well spent."

Steve Mandel, a City Councilman at the time Sidley Austin was hired in March, defended the review as necessary due diligence to investigate potentially serious allegations.

"I'm pretty sure none of us were thinking it'd wind up costing the amount of money it cost," Mandel said.

Rotering said she had been contacted by whistleblowers alleging various misdeeds — some of them potentially criminal. Mandel said he was told by Sidley Austin partner David Hoffman that, "'Where there's smoke, there's usually fire.' Looking back, maybe there was just smoldering embers."

After nearly nine months, Sidley Austin outlined several best practices for a more transparent and accountable local government, as well as to tighten safety provisions for municipal facilities.

One major development of Sidley Austin's investigation was the discovery of a 2008 report from city consultant UGL-Equis Corp., which showed the Highland Park Theater required \$2.6 million in urgent repairs — a report several trustees said was not provided to them before they agreed to purchase the building later that year for \$2.1 million.

Former Highland Park City Manager David Limardi declined to comment on the UGL-Equis report, instead pointing to a recent letter addressed to "Friends, Colleagues and/or Members of the Highland Park Community" in which he defended the theater's purchase and criticized the methods of Sidley Austin's investigation.

"At no time did anyone associated with the investigation contact me or the Deputy City Manager, the individuals with the most intimate knowledge of the purchase and operation of the theater, yet other 'former employees,' who left the city for a variety of reasons, were apparently utilized as sources of factual information," Limardi wrote.

While the firm's invoices are considered confidential and there was no written contract, the amounts are not, and were approved in public at the City Council's two December meetings. The two bills — one for \$96,990.40 and another for \$102,172.44 — total \$199,162.84.

Highland Park City Manager David Knapp, who had not yet been hired when the council engaged Sidley Austin, created a list of 29 "best practices" from the firm's recommendations.

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