

# Drama in Antioch: City spokesperson fired amid political firestorm involving police, City Hall

The firing of Rolando Bonilla comes after police chief says a quote was falsely attributed to him

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ANTIOCH — When a burglar busted through the front window of a local restaurant and ransacked the place last month, few could have predicted it would create a political firestorm that would lead to the firing of the city's spokesman.

But that's exactly what happened — and the drama is far from over.

In the three weeks since [the break-in at Hillcrest Restaurant and Taphouse](#), tensions brewing between Antioch's police department and City Hall have boiled over, as complaints about the slow police response to the burglary devolved into a game of finger-pointing. The city spokesman, Rolando Bonilla, was sacked over a provocative quote falsely attributed to the city's police chief, which has led to calls for an investigation and a scathing memo by the chief demanding answers.

The chief has also accused the city's mayor, Lamar Thorpe, of muzzling the department's attempts to spread good news. And all this has come as eight officers — or about 10% of the police force — are on leave [while a federal grand jury continues to review evidence](#) against Antioch and Pittsburg officers and weighs potential criminal charges.



The most recent controversy reached a pinnacle earlier this month when Antioch City Manager Cornelius “Con” Johnson terminated the city’s contract with Bonilla, over a quote the spokesperson sent to a media outlet — and attributed to police Chief Steven Ford — blaming the Antioch police union for “circus-like antics” after the union president criticized the city over waning officer staffing levels.

When Ford saw the quote, he was furious. He fired off a memo to Johnson, as well as the city attorney and human resources director, accusing Bonilla of “negligence” and of violating his contract, and demanded a retraction from the news outlet, KRON4. The news station swiftly [updated its story](#) to reflect that the quote hadn’t actually come from Ford.

Reached for comment on Thursday, Bonilla fired an accusation back at Johnson, saying that the statement was provided “at the direction of Antioch’s City Manager.”

“The work of reforming a city’s culture is never easy but, outside of trusting the City Manager, I absolutely do not regret any decision that I made while serving the city of Antioch,” Bonilla said in an email to this news organization.

Johnson did not respond for comment on Bonilla’s statement. Reached by phone, Ford initially said he would refute Bonilla’s accusation, but later contacted this news organization to say he had changed his mind and had no comment.

Bonilla, who ran for San Jose City Council last year, worked under a contract with the city of Antioch and works at Voler Strategic Advisors, a San Jose-based communications firm run by his wife.

For much of 2022 and 2023, he found himself caught between Antioch’s mayor and city manager, who say they’re determined to reform the city’s police department, and a police chief and union that have accused City Hall of stifling good news about the agency, while emphasizing negative revelations — like the fact that multiple officers are under criminal investigation by the FBI for alleged civil rights violations, fraud and other crimes. Ford, meanwhile, [has called for departmental reforms](#) related to investigations of officer misconduct and the use of police dogs.



A customer is silhouetted in front of the main entrance door with shattered glass after a burglary two days ago at the the Hillcrest Restaurant and Taphouse in Antioch, Calif., on Friday, Feb. 17, 2023. Another restaurant not too far from here was burglarized too. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

Tensions were already high on Feb. 17, when the Hillcrest Restaurant and Taphouse was brazenly burglarized during the early morning hours. Its owner, Dwayne Gilliland, watched the crime live through surveillance videos from his Oakley home, and called police, then sat there waiting for officers to respond. Hours passed before the cops arrived — and by then the burglar was long gone.

Frustrated, Gilliland [lambasted the four-hour response time on social media](#). His post went viral, leading Antioch police Lt. Michael Mellone to issue a written public apology and a pledge to do better. As Bay Area media took notice, requests for comment from Ford came pouring in, while the police union issued its own statement.

Antioch Police Officers Association president Sgt. Rick Hoffman's response focused on Thorpe, saying that one of the "major driving forces" for the department's "staffing crisis" is "ongoing rhetoric." His statement also revealed that a suspect had been arrested in the burglary. In a memo obtained by this newspaper, Ford wrote he drafted a news release on the arrest but "was likewise told (by Bonilla) not to publish under the premise that it contained negative and unnecessary information."

It was around this time that Bonilla sent the statement to KRON4. In Ford's memo, dated Feb. 23, he accused Bonilla of trying to inflame tensions within the police department.

"The content was strategically phrased in such a manner to provoke divisiveness and damage the relationship between myself and the members of the Antioch Police Officers Association and employees of APD," Ford wrote. "This damage would be particularly impactful given that, over the past 10 months, I have made a concerted effort to foster a strong relationship with the members of this Department."

In an email to Johnson, Bonilla voiced his own displeasure with the fallout over the quote. He reiterated that he'd been "directed and authorized by you to put Dr. Ford's name on the statement released to the press," and he feared he was now being made into a scapegoat.

"As you recall, the Chief was out of town which is why you committed to connecting with him and getting his approval on the statement," Bonilla said. "APD refused to speak to the press, as Capt. (Anthony) Morefield declined your written order to talk to the press. And by Saturday, Lt. Mellone was talking to press backtracking the Chief's initial statement."

Meanwhile, back at the Hillcrest Restaurant and Taphouse, Gilliland says he's still waiting on the police for reports of the burglary he needs to show his insurance company to cover the damage. He says he blames city government, not the police, for the whole debacle.

"I come from a law enforcement family so I respect what they do," Gilliland said Friday. "I know they have to deal with policy, and policy is issued from the city."