

SHENG THAO ON TRIAL ...but Oakland's machine isn't (yet)



WHY THIS TRIAL MATTERS

Oakland's recalled mayor is in federal court this week on bribery charges. But this trial is about more than Sheng Thao. It's about the political machine that made her and is still poverty pimping the City of Oakland. Oakland fired the driver when we recalled Thao, but the machine remains, and now it is controlling the city through its new driver, mayor Barbara Lee.

What you're about to read is shocking, but true. And the clues are hiding in plain sight. The biggest clue that connects all the dots was found by the FBI; a hand-written document by Thao's chief of staff, Leigh Hanson calling to "Use BP (Black People) As Tokens" to defeat the recall, and much more. This document exposed the machine that controls Oakland. Sheng Thao is on trial, but the machine is not. **We are about to change that.**

WHY THIS TRIAL MATTERS

The feds say **David and Andy Duong**, who own California Waste Solutions, wanted three things from Thao:

- 1) Get the city to buy their modular "**Evolutionary Homes**" units.
- 2) Get **California Waste Solutions** a longer city recycling contract.
- 3) Let them **install their own picks** to top city jobs.

In return, the feds say, the Duongs secretly paid for \$75,000 worth of **political hit mailers** against Thao's 2022 opponents and gave **Andre Jones**, her partner a \$95,000 no-show job.

On June 20, 2024, the FBI kicked in the door. That November, 61% of **Oakland voters recalled her**. In Janury 2025, a **grand jury indicted Thao** on multiple counts including **corruption and conspiracy bribery**.

Now, for five or six weeks, a jury hears it all under oath. They will see some 500 exhibits, including bank records, recorded phone calls, and **videos Andy Duong allegedly secretly recorded of politicians**.

The government's witness list has 68 names, including: supervisor **Nikki Bas**, Thao's chief of staff **Leigh Hanson**, former city execs **Jestin Johnson** and **Harold Duffey**, councilman **Kevin Jenkins**, and whistleblower **Latonda Simmons**.

The FBI's informant, **Mario Juarez**, has already pleaded guilty. Former San Leandro councilman **Bryan Azevedo** also has pleaded guilty.

THE CASE FILE

U.S. v. Thao, Jones, Duong & Duong, No. 4:25-cr-00003-YGR, N.D. Cal., Oakland. Judge: Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers.⁴ Eight counts: conspiracy, bribery, honest-services mail and wire fraud; plus false statements for Andy Duong. Jury selection Oct. 13. Trial starts Oct. 19, to last five to six weeks. Pled guilty, will testify: Mario Juarez; ex-San Leandro councilman Bryan Azevedo.

And then there's a recorded call from January 2024, filed by prosecutors, in which **Andy Duong** tells an Oakland councilmember that **he told Thao to "get your shit together"** on buying his housing units — and that **after he complained, "she called Jestin.... you know, he showed up."** The transcript is in the court records. You can read it for yourself.

The unions and donors who spent almost \$800,000 to elect Thao in 2022 are, for the most part, still doing business at City Hall today.

*The trial begins here.
It won't end here.*

SOURCES AT [OAKLANDWATCH.ORG](https://oaklandwatch.org)

THE NOTE THAT NAMES NAMES

Recall

Opponent \$:

- Foundational Oakland PAC
↳ June (Hank Levy)

Conway
Dreyfuss

Measure 2 recall table.
- signal thread.

Our \$:

trades, unions (carpenters, firefighters, CNA, SEIU (team) labor council)

Akonadi / Quinn solicitor - Lous Lam
state tech restrictions - Chamber
charter amendments
change recall rules / non-resident funders.

Campaign w/ people:

campaign manager (Anthony)
consultant + account.

lawyer + weekly kitchen cabinet.

CM Fife can outreach to NAACP
- use BP as tokens.

Black supporters:

+ Credible messengers.
↳ Oakland Rising } public forum.
APEN, Courage

+ Measure B - general recall.

+ Interference campaign @ signature locations

Chief roadshow

Comms: George

Lakoff: media analysis

+ Chief of Police announce
+ Budget Comms.

+ Series of press conferences
"this is bad for Oakland"

- once a week
+ Hyundai mechanism

Presence:

+ Mayor's schedule

+ weekends off

+ 110% Monday - Friday

+ 5 public events a week

+ TV

call-in Twitter

■ HANDWRITTEN NOTES BY THAO CHIEF OF STAFF LEIGH HANSON FROM A MARCH 2024 "KITCHEN CABINET" MEETING ON BEATING THE RECALL. RELEASED BY THE CITY OF OAKLAND IN APRIL 2025 AMONG ~1,000 RECORDS TIED TO THE FBI PROBE, AFTER A PUBLIC RECORDS REQUEST.

"OUR \$"

This section shows Sheng Thao's donors: the money behind the machine. At the top: SEIU and other unions, Piedmont billionaire Quinn Delaney and Akonadi Foundation, once run by representative Lateefah Simon. The unions control both sides of the table.

The unions helped Thao cheat to qualify for the ballot after she filed late to run for mayor, covering it up with forged timestamps and deleted video footage. Also listed is the Oakland Chamber of Commerce, led by Barbara Leslie, which also is controlled by the machine.

"BLACK SUPPORTERS"

District 3 councilwoman Carroll Fife is noted to "use BP as tokens" and "pay attention to" former District 7 councilwoman Treva Reid, who abruptly moved to Ohio after Thao was indicted. Fife attacked Oakland NAACP for supporting Thao's recall.

Oakland Rising, APEN, and CURYJ are noted as "Black supporters." Funded by larger orgs like Akonadi, they put a Black face on the gift. Oakland Rising leader Chaney Turner fought the recall and defended Thao, and attacked Oakland NAACP, calling them "right-wing" for supporting Thao's ouster.

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Hey Dad,
can I get a
bite of your
sandwich?

Sorry, son!
I've been eating this
shit sandwich for years.
It's the only one
I got!



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OAKLAND**

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× PIN IT UP ■ THEY REALLY DO IT ALL FOR **THEMSELVES**

MEET THE NEW BOSS

Same as the old boss



Lee's first hire as her chief of staff was **Miya Saika Chen**, former chief of staff to councilwoman **Nikki Bas**, an **SEIU** researcher, and a fellow at **George Soros' Open Society**. Saika Chen is the one who brought the **Defund the Police** effort to Oakland in 2020. When city administrator **Jestin Johnson** resigned in May 2026, Lee tapped **Betsy Lake**, a former **Sheng Thao** asst. city administrator.

Barbara Lee was the Machine's desperation choice to keep power.

Barbara Lee is mayor in name only. The Machine controls City Hall. One clear indicator: A recent public records request shows that **mayor Lee has, according to the city, neither sent nor been copied on a single email since taking office.**

You can't run a city without sending emails. **So who's running Oakland?**

Sheng Thao's first hire as mayor was **Zach Goldman** as her chief of policy and legislative affairs. Goldman came directly from the same job at **SEIU**. **He then went back to SEIU after Thao's recall.** Goldman later resurfaced on Lee's charter reform working group. **Piedmont billionaire Quinn Delaney** served on Lee's transition team. The same **nurses' union** that helped bankroll the campaign against Thao's recall also **poured money into Lee's election.**

Barbara Lee accepted significant political contributions from the **Duong family** (second only to the amount she recived from **Rob Bonta** and **Mia Bonta**), and Lee **refused to return the Duongs' money.**

The Duongs are MAGA who gave money to Trump. After they were indicted, they got special permission to **travel to Washington, D.C. for Trump's inauguration.** Apparently, supporting Trump and MAGA are totally acceptable in "progressive" Oakland, **if you feed the Machine.**

Measure E was a mask-off moment. The Machine tried to use **Lee's** popularity and its **financial muscle** to **push yet another tax** on Oaklanders. But voters said OH HELL NO, and roundly **defeated the parcel tax** for the first time in decades.

SHENG THAO TRIAL

68 potential prosecution witnesses

*** EVOLUTIONARY HOMES CONNECTION / EXPECTED TESTIMONY**

Star indicates a reported link to the company or its proposed housing deal.

* Mario Juarez	Bryant Ocampo
* Bryan Azevedo	Rebecca Scatena
* Larry Gallegos	Taylor Blevins
* Cesley Frost	Tavares Nichols
* Julie Wedge	Joseph Pettway
* Jestin Johnson	Andrea Pomicpic
Samari Johnson	Sean O'Brien
Renia Webb	Richy Abraham
Julie Caskey	Katherine Barclay
* Chris Wedge	Tyler Nave
* Cecilia Mendez	Alexandra Bryant
* Brandon Harami	Stephanie Watt
Jimmy Hoang	James Folger
Betsy Lake	Katie Taylor
Louansee Moua	James Webb
Harold Duffey	Rachael Grace
Jelani Killings	Jeff Byram
Francis Zamora	Amanda Chung
* Leigh Hanson	Michael Kan
Noah Finneburgh	Christopher McCollow
Tonya Allen	Zackery O'Connor
Brittany Hines	Jeffrey Fitch
Asha Reed	Aaron Parker
Steven Falk	Sandra Alvarez-Ramirez
Emily Weinstein	Christopher Wilkins
Zach Goldman	Pete Gonzalez
Latonda Simmons	Christine Stegner
Cheryl Ho	Ben Nikssarin
Danny Wan	Imran Khan
Teresa Hoang	Michael Hammond
Phua Gilman	Jesse Bumanlag
* Nikki Fortunato Bas	Cindy Ho
* Kevin Jenkins	Huy (Derrick) Dang
Luan Mai	Daniel Martinelli

THE DRIVERS CHANGE. THE MACHINE REMAINS.

Oakland's political Machine is not one organization. It's an armada: the **DSA-aligned** wing of the Democratic Party, the **public sector unions**, a **web of nonprofits** and the **foundations** that fund them, an in-group of **consultants** and **city staff**, and **local news media** that tell their story.

The Machine picks who to run for election, who receives the political money and support they need to win, who gets the contracts, what you hear about it and how to spin it.



The trial is just the beginning.

The Sheng Thao corruption trial isn't just about one mayor, one family, one scandal.

The Machine that made Sheng Thao possible is still running over Oakland. As this series will show, that is the much bigger story than this one trial.

The dysfunction we endure every day — the deficits, the broken services, the favoritism, the zero accountability — **is the product of a system that has been consolidating power for decades.**

Oakland has been the test track for a political Machine that is exported across California and the country.

That makes this city ground zero.

The trial is the starting line. This series is a roadmap, and a warning.

Over the next several issues, we will hit every landmark: **Who recruits the candidates. Who funds them. Who covers for them. Who cashes in.**

Our final destination: How to take Oakland back from The Machine.

See oaklandwatch.org for details and documentation for every statement in this issue. Don't just take our word for it. **Read it and decide for yourself what to think.**

Oakland Watch is a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization. We are real humans who live in Oakland. This series is not AI.

NO MORE LIES.



**NO MORE CORRUPTION
IN OAKLAND!**

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