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Gloves off on cost of Michael Jackson's services

City attorney plans investigation of \$1.4-million bill, but some see long-term gains from global exposure.

By Maeve Reston and Ari B. Bloomekatz

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Hours after the last eulogy to Michael Jackson bounced off the rafters of Staples Center, discussion in Los Angeles civic circles turned to more down-to-earth matters: Were the pop star's death and memorial a net fiscal loss or gain to the city, and should taxpayers get stuck with the tab?

City Atty. Carmen Trutanich said this week that he was investigating how the city ended up with a \$1.4-million bill. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's office conceded that a city effort to solicit online donations to cover the memorial costs yielded only \$17,000 before being upended by "frequent and prolonged server crashes."

Some argued that it didn't matter -- the city would get its money back, and more, as a result of the global attention focused on Los Angeles for the better part of a week.

But the new city controller, Wendy Greuel, seemed more concerned with the \$48,826 that the Emergency Management Department spent on 3,500 boxed lunches from Jensen's Finest Foods in Wrightwood, in San Bernardino County. The lunches were intended for emergency personnel at the Jackson memorial, but Greuel thought it seemed excessive, especially after her staff called a nearby Subway and was given an estimate of \$17,491 for the same number of lunches.

She sent a stern letter to the head of the department, James Featherstone, criticizing the cost. She added: "It would have been preferable to make this purchase from a business located in the city of Los Angeles, as opposed to nearly 80 miles away."

Featherstone defended the expenditure. He said the city has used Jensen's for years because the company is able to prepare thousands of lunches on short notice, and the meals

were costly because they contained enough food to keep police and firefighters going for 12 to 15 hours -- two sandwiches, two drinks, a packaged dessert, a candy bar, trail mix, chips or crackers, a granola bar and a pack of gum. "It wasn't just a boxed lunch," he said.

Nor was the Jackson memorial just a funeral.

And amid an economic recession in which the city is faced with service cuts and layoffs, the issue of who covers the city's costs for big events like the Jackson memorial and last month's Lakers' victory ceremony has become a political issue.

City Hall frequently confronts the question of how much it should spend for privately sponsored events.

For years, the city has absorbed thousands of dollars in costs for neighborhood block parties, farmers' markets, 10K races, church fairs and parades.

It has also subsidized larger events such as the Academy Awards at the Kodak Theatre, which got a \$410,000 waiver from the City Council in January, or the Grammy Awards at Staples Center, which was granted a \$124,163 waiver earlier this year.

City Councilman Dennis Zine has been the most outspoken advocate of billing the promoters of Tuesday's memorial.

"This was a private memorial for a celebrity singer, Michael Jackson," he said. "And no disrespect to him, his family or his fans, but why should the people of Los Angeles be obligated to pay for what they decided to do? They could have had a service at Forest Lawn, they could have had a service at a local church. They decided to have a memorial of this magnitude and have a worldwide event."

Others argued that the city's costs, mostly for police, were the sorts of expenses that cities routinely incur when there are large public events. "Part of being a big city is that big events happen," said Council President Eric Garcetti.

Garcetti said he supports an inquiry launched by Trutanich to determine the expenses incurred by the city and unravel who authorized the city's response.

There were those who argued that the Jackson memorial might have brought more money into the local economy than it cost.

Jack Kyser, chief economist for the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp., said his group estimated that the memorial brought about \$4 million to local businesses in the form of food sales, parking, miscellaneous shopping and hotel stays.

"We're a center of celebrity," he said. "You have to be able to deal with it. You have to look at the positives and the negatives. Yes, you have some expenses, but if you handle the whole thing in a smooth fashion, which they did, you get a real positive."

Carol Schatz, president and chief executive of the Central City Assn., said the memorial was actually a mixed bag, economically.

"All the downtown hotels were close to being full as a result of the service," she said. "However, it did not spill over to the restaurants, especially on the day of the service, because so many businesses fearing these enormous multitudes had their employees stay home."

Still, she said the memorial was "worth its weight in gold" for the attention it brought to "the new downtown that we've created in the last 10 years."

Taking that argument a step further, Joel Kotkin, presidential fellow at Chapman University in Orange, said that Jackson's death and memorial helped "brand" the city and would have lasting economic value.

"If there is a positive," he said, "it's that it sort of reconfirmed L.A.'s status as a capital of pop music, celebrity, and lunacy. . . . That's infinitely more important than a one-day event."

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