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Sidney Torres IV vs. Robert Ramelli: Kenner trash contract is causing a stink between these two

BY FAIMON A. ROBERTS III | Staff writer
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Ramelli Waste LLC employees collect garbage on Georgia Street in Kenner on March 4, 2020.
STAFF PHOTO BY DAVID GRUNFELD

A dust-up over Kenner's garbage contract has prompted a flurry of accusations and denials by two of New Orleans' garbage collection titans, as Robert Ramelli and Sidney Torres IV traded barbs this week as the Kenner City Council prepares to take up the matter Thursday evening.

Kenner is in the fourth year of a 10-year contract with Ramelli Waste. But due to a provision in the contract that makes it non-exclusive, the city is poised to award a nearly identical contract to Torres' company, IV Waste, on Thursday.

That prospect prompted an angry response from Robert Ramelli, who accused Torres of backroom dealing, a claim that Torres denied.

City officials say Torres' company promises the city improved reliability, technology and service, all at the same price that the city has been paying Ramelli Waste.



But Robert Ramelli says the abrupt switch doesn't pass the smell test. He says losing the deal will leave him high and dry on loans he took out to buy extra trucks and equipment to handle Kenner's waste.

He also questioned the timing of the decision, noting that his longtime Kenner contact, former city Chief Administrative Officer Joseph "Nicky" Nicolosi, who is now an independent consultant, recently ended his contract with Ramelli for what he described as "other opportunities."

He noted that in December, when Nicolosi still worked for Ramelli, Kenner officials were effusive in their praise for Ramelli during a debate over amending the formulas that determine how much residents pay for garbage pickup.

Ramelli had met city leaders "more than halfway" and "stepped up to the plate" in addressing city concerns and demands concerning garbage pickup and recycling, Mayor Ben Zahn said on Dec. 20.

Specifically, Zahn said, Ramelli had promised to provide new, 36-gallon rolling recycling bins with tops, to provide a truck to pick up construction debris, and to work with the city on setting up a permanent drop-off site that would be staffed with Ramelli personnel.

The December discussion was followed in February by a vote to amend Ramelli's contract to ensure that the company was paid for its services.

But even as the council was taking that vote, the Zahn administration was introducing a separate measure to bring in Torres on a 10-year contract, at the same cost to residents as what Ramelli would charge — with some tweaks that appear more favorable for Torres.

For instance, in the new contract, if a homeowner requests a new bin after theirs is stolen or vandalized, the homeowner will be need to get a police report and then will be charged a one-time \$65 fee. Under the Ramelli contract, Ramelli had to pay for the new bins. Delay in replacing bins was a frequent complaint from homeowners about Ramelli, council members have said.

The reason for the abrupt switch, Zahn and other city officials say, is simple: Ramelli failed to follow through on the promises referenced in the Dec. 20 meeting.

"Ramelli has not provided the 36-gallon containers or the 'C and D (construction and demolition)' truck or made people available for the drop-off site," said Ed Rapier, the city's attorney. City officials also fielded numerous complaints about Ramelli regarding Christmas tree pickup and other issues, he said.

"There was no movement on Ramelli's part," he added.

Robert Ramelli, however, said an amendment to his contract was not voted on until February, and he didn't want to provide the new services until he had the deal in writing. He also said he has never had a written complaint from the city government in his nearly 15 years of picking up garbage in Kenner.

The real story, Ramelli said, revolves around Nicolosi and his close relationship with Zahn. A longtime Kenner political operative, Nicolosi first brought Ramelli's firm into Kenner more than a decade ago when Nicolosi was the city's chief administrative officer.

Nicolosi also is the Kenner representative on the New Orleans Aviation Board, which governs Louis Armstrong International Airport. He was appointed by New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell after being nominated by Zahn and the Kenner City Council.

Until January, Nicolosi acted as a liaison between the city and Ramelli, Ramelli said.

Nicolosi called Ramelli in late January, Ramelli said, and said he was ending his contract with the waste collection firm.

"He said some other companies had come to him with an opportunity," Ramelli recalled. "I asked if he was going to take Kenner's contract away from me."

Ramelli said he believed that Nicolosi had gone to work for IV Waste.

Reached late Wednesday, Torres said Ramelli was just trying to cover for his own company's failings.

"I worked too hard to be doing backroom deals," Torres said. "I don't need it."

Torres acknowledged that he had spoken to Nicolosi, but said he had not hired him. He also said that Kenner had approached him after having problems with Ramelli.

"I didn't go after them; they came to me," Torres said.

Nicolosi also denied Ramelli's claims. "I brought no one to the city of Kenner whatsoever," he said. "I did not bring Sidney Torres to Kenner. Period. Dot. Over and out."

Nicolosi conceded that he had been asked his opinion on "different things," but he said those opinions were confidential. The city never asked him about IV Waste, he said.

Nicolosi did acknowledge that he and some City Council members recently toured IV Waste's facilities.

Rapier, the city attorney, said Nicolosi is not being paid by the city. He also said that Nicolosi's "expertise in the garbage industry was certainly used" by city leaders when evaluating a move away from Ramelli.

"Nicky Nicolosi did provide insight into the garbage business," he said.

Some observers have questioned why the city didn't put out the contract for public bid in order to get the best rate. But Rapier said the city is not required by state law to do so because garbage pickup is classified as a professional service. Ramelli was first selected more than a decade ago and then renewed in 2016, both times by no-bid contracts, Rapier said.

What's more, a clause in the city's contract with Ramelli says it is a non-exclusive contract. That means that the city is not technically canceling Ramelli's contract; rather, it is adding a vendor. The proposed contract with IV Waste has the same non-exclusivity clause, Rapier said, so the city could add other vendors whenever it wants to.

"We could potentially have a third, a fourth, a sixth or a tenth vendor," he said.

IV Waste offers better technology and service for Kenner's citizens, Rapier said. It could begin picking up the trash as soon as May 1.

Regardless of the outcome of Thursday's vote, the issue likely isn't dead. When asked whether the matter could end up in court, Ramelli didn't hesitate.

"Without a doubt," he said.

Editors Note: This story has been clarified to reflect that the \$65 can replacement fee is incurred by a resident when a can is stolen or vandalized and after the resident files a police report.

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Ramelli sues Kenner over switch to Sidney Torres-owned garbage collection company

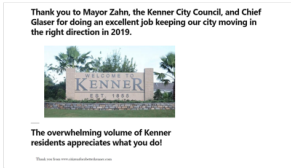
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