

## Why the building industry wants this bureaucrat back at City Hall

By Thomas A. Corfman June 20, 2015

Asif Rahman gives bureaucrats a good name.

Yes, you read that right. While city employees often are maligned, nearly 500 architects and developers signed a petition imploring Mayor Rahm Emanuel to bring back this 27-year City Hall veteran after he resigned recently from the Chicago Department of Buildings.

As deputy commissioner in charge of reviewing construction permits, **Rahman**, 55, held a position that is crucial to the construction industry, which needs city approval to start even the smallest projects. He often cut through technicalities to come up with common-sense solutions to thorny building code issues, according to people who dealt with him. Known for his late-night and weekend emails, Rahman also wasn't afraid to make decisions, a rare quality among midlevel public officials, who often do not want to stick their necks out, they say.

"Asif was the problem solver," says developer Alan Schachtman, an executive vice president at Chicago-based Fifield, who put his name on the petition. "Asif was the guy you went to. And when you got an answer, that was it."

Rahman resigned from the city on April 30 and started work the next day as director of construction at the **Housing Authority of Cook County**. He also has applied for his city pension.

He is so highly regarded that Judy Frydland, **named acting building commissioner** on May 27, has asked him to return.

Rahman declines to be interviewed, says Monique Bond, a spokeswoman for the county's low-income housing agency. "He was approached by the new commissioner, but he had already retired and accepted another position," she says after talking to Rahman.

How the city lost such a valuable employee is a complicated tale. Several city employees and industry figures familiar with the case spoke with Crain's but decline to be identified discussing a personnel matter. This account is based on those interviews:

Rahman had a rocky relationship with Frydland's predecessor, Felicia Davis, a former violent crimes detective at the Chicago Police Department who was named building commissioner in 2013. At the beginning of 2014, he considered going to work for the housing authority but was persuaded to stay by the mayor's office. (Davis recently was appointed by Emanuel to be executive director of the Public Building Commission of Chicago. A spokeswoman for her referred questions to City Hall, where an Emanuel spokeswoman declines to comment.)

Sometime around June 2014, the Office of Inspector General began investigating allegations that Rahman received kickbacks or gratuities from permit applicants. Investigators interviewed Rahman, who denied the allegations, and examined his financial records.

The allegations likely came from within the department, and Rahman believed Davis did not support him during the probe, sources say. The investigation ended without any findings of impropriety. Rahman opted to wait until the investigation blew over before resigning. A spokeswoman for Inspector General Joseph Ferguson declines to comment.

The online petition, which started with an email to 21 architectural firms on May 13, quickly exploded, says Edward Twohey, a principal in Chicago-based Burns & Beyerl Architects, one of the sponsors of the petition. It gathered 475 supporters in two days.

When the petitions were submitted on May 15, Ald. Brendan Reilly, whose 42nd Ward includes downtown, tweeted that the building department “never should have let him leave. Asif is irreplaceable.”

## **MAYOR'S ALLIES**

Other Emanuel allies on the Chicago City Council also bemoan Rahman's departure.

“I don't want to deny that there have been improvements, but things still take too long to resolve,” says Ald. Joe Moore, 49th, the only alderman to put his name on the petition. “Sometimes there's an application of the rules without context. That's what Asif was good at, applying the rules with the mind of the intent of the rules, to protect public health and safety. And if the application of the rules didn't pursue that, then maybe you don't apply the rule in quite the same way.”

Moore said he was unaware of the inspector general's investigation and did not know the reasons for Rahman's resignation.

Ald. Danny Solis, 25th, chairman of the Committee on Zoning, Landmarks and Building Standards, believes Rahman is “a tremendously dedicated and hardworking individual,” according to his spokesman, Tim Nazanin.

**Rahman** began his city career in 1988 at the Chicago Fire Department's Fire Prevention Bureau, where he reviewed building permit applications for compliance with the fire safety code. He was named deputy building commissioner in 2012. On May 16, one day after the petitions were submitted, Davis sent an email to members of the construction industry, praising Rahman, denying he was “forced out” and saying he had retired.

By the time of the email, Rahman already had been working for two weeks at the county housing authority, where he will be responsible for a \$100 million pipeline of development projects. The agency's executive director is Rich Monocchio, who held several senior positions in the Richard M. Daley administration, including building commissioner from 2008 to 2011.

Rahman's new annual salary is about \$110,000, or roughly \$10,000 less than he was **making with the city**. He also has applied for his city pension of nearly \$77,000 a year, retirement records show.

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## The bureaucrat developers love is coming back to City Hall

By Thomas A. Corfman August 13, 2015

Buildings Commissioner Judy Frydland has persuaded a highly regarded former senior official to return to City Hall, four months after his departure sparked an outcry among architects and developers.

As deputy commissioner in charge of reviewing permits, Asif Rahman earned a reputation as a decisive bureaucrat willing to make common-sense decisions about how to apply the technical requirements of the building code. As Crain's **reported in June**, an online petition to Mayor Rahm Emanuel asking for Rahman's return gathered 475 supporters in two days, including contractors and permit expeditors.

Rahman is returning to the Buildings Department on Aug. 17 as deputy commissioner, the same title he held before, reporting directly to Frydland, a department spokeswoman confirmed.

He previously made about \$120,000 with the city, the sixth-highest-paid employee in the department. The spokeswoman could not immediately determine what his new salary will be or whether his line of reporting had changed.

His homecoming is a win for Frydland, who was **appointed buildings commissioner** less than a month after Rahman's April 30 resignation. A former deputy corporation counsel, she started wooing him and didn't give up after he initially rebuffed her entreaties.

His return is a vindication for Rahman, who resigned after a tumultuous period at the department. Last year, the Office of Inspector General investigated allegations that Rahman received improper kickbacks, but did not find any improprieties. Rahman denied the allegations and believed he was not adequately supported during the probe, according to sources familiar with the case. He did not return messages requesting comment.

In an email, developer Alan Schachtman, an executive vice president at Chicago-based Fifield, said, "I am pleased that Asif is returning and look forward to working with him to try to streamline and improve the building permit process."

A 27-year veteran of city government, Rahman had already started taking his municipal retirement payments, which he will have to suspend upon his return.

The day after his resignation, he began work as director of construction at the **Housing Authority of Cook County**, which is ramping up its development of low-income housing in the suburbs.

Rahman's return to the city must be a bit of a disappointment to Rich Monocchio, the authority's executive director. Monocchio held several senior positions in the Daley administration, including building commissioner from 2008 to 2011.

The authority "supports any employee's decision to seek other career opportunities," says a spokeswoman, Monique Bond. "We wish Mr. Rahman luck in his future endeavors."

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