



“A Chip Off the Old Block: Gregory E. Simonian and the Quiet Tyranny in Rancho Santa Margarita and Beyond”

In the City of Rancho Santa Margarita, power doesn't merely reside in the city council chambers—it lives and breathes in the backrooms, behind closed doors, where City Attorney **Gregory E. Simonian** operates with a brand of unchecked authority eerily reminiscent of his father, **Art Simonian**, the controversial former city manager of Yorba Linda.

If the name sounds familiar, it should. Art Simonian made headlines in the 1990s for treating Yorba Linda more like a family business than a public trust. Under his control, nepotism flourished, transparency evaporated, and public funds were treated like a private inheritance. The *Los Angeles Times* once characterized Art's tenure as a "small-town fiefdom," complete with sweetheart contracts, suppressed dissent, and allegations of bullying behavior toward employees and whistleblowers. The Orange County District Attorney eventually declined to prosecute him—but not for lack of damning reports or internal investigations.

Now, fast forward to Rancho Santa Margarita, where **Gregory Simonian**, Art's son, has been city attorney for years. To many insiders, it's not merely a legacy—it's a dynasty of intimidation, secrecy, and control.

Whispers in the Hallways

Multiple city insiders and concerned residents allege that Greg Simonian exerts an outsized and authoritarian influence over city affairs—far beyond his role as legal counsel. Among the accusations:

- **Surveillance and Intimidation:** Credible rumors persist that Simonian has political opponents and city watchdogs followed. Others claim their calls have been mysteriously traced or monitored after public disputes with the city.
- **Threats to Councilmembers:** Some current and former city officials, speaking under condition of anonymity, claim Simonian has threatened retaliation against council members who challenge his recommendations or push back against his influence. "Fall in line or risk being embarrassed," one source claimed he told a sitting councilmember.
- **Abuse of City Funds:** Like his father before him, Gregory is said to treat taxpayer money as a tool for control—spending freely on legal consultants, pet projects, and investigations designed more for political leverage than public benefit.
- **Hostile Environment for Women and Minorities:** Reports have emerged that Simonian's office is anything but inclusive. Female staff have described him as dismissive and condescending, while several minority residents say they have been unfairly targeted by city investigations following disputes.

Expanding His Influence: Laguna Hills Under the Same Shadow

But Rancho Santa Margarita isn't the only city under Simonian's long shadow. He also serves as **city attorney for Laguna Hills**—a city with a troubling racial history and **zero minority representation** in its city council *in over 30 years of incorporation*. Despite a growing minority population, not a single Latino, Black, or Asian-American has ever served on the council.

Under Simonian's guidance, Laguna Hills has aggressively **resisted transitioning to district elections**, even after receiving a California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) demand letter. Sources close to the matter say Simonian led the effort to stonewall the change—putting the city at legal risk just to preserve the status quo. His opposition, critics say, isn't just legal—it's ideological.

Simonian's influence doesn't stop at elections. Allegations persist that he has **manipulated or selectively enforced city codes** to benefit certain contractors—echoing the same tactics his father used in Yorba Linda. Insiders claim that favored developers are granted fast-tracked approvals or given waivers other applicants can only dream of.

Worse still, he treats the **Laguna Hills City Council and Planning Commission as interchangeable**, using both as extensions of his authority. "They don't make decisions," said one former city employee. "They follow marching orders. And Greg gives them."

The city has also experienced a string of **racially charged incidents**, many of which have been covered by local media. Yet, under Simonian's watch, no meaningful diversity efforts have been pursued. Instead, critics say he has fostered an environment of exclusion—one where equity, accountability, and fair representation are treated as political threats rather than civic priorities.

A Pattern Set in Stone

Greg Simonian's style is not born in a vacuum—it's inherited. Art Simonian built a reputation for weaponizing city bureaucracy for personal and political gain. One damning report exposed how Art hired close friends into plush city jobs, dished out no-bid contracts, and suppressed internal complaints with chilling efficiency.

Even when the *LA Times* exposed his misconduct and public outrage grew, Art skated by with strategic political alliances and a DA unwilling to prosecute. Greg, it seems, has taken that playbook and upgraded it with modern tools—cell tracking, legal maneuvering, and confidential memos that manipulate rather than protect.

Whether in Rancho Santa Margarita or Laguna Hills, the pattern is the same: centralize power, silence opposition, and treat local government like a personal law firm.

When Will the Pattern Break?

Gregory E. Simonian may claim to protect the legal interests of the cities he serves, but his actions—echoing those of his father—suggest a deeper truth: the Simonian legacy doesn't serve the public. It **controls** it.

If residents in Orange County truly want ethical governance, they must start by asking the most uncomfortable but necessary question: **Why are we still letting this dynasty run our cities?**