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Burke residence far removed from her constituency, The L.A. County supervisor is living in Brentwood despite laws requiring that she reside in her South L.A. district. She has a condo nearer her constituents, but acknowledges she spends little time there.

By Jack Leonard and Matt Lait, Times Staff Writers

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Los Angeles County Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke, who was elected to represent some of the county's poorest neighborhoods, is living in a gated Brentwood home, despite laws requiring her to reside in the predominantly South Los Angeles district she serves.

In an interview with The Times two weeks ago, Burke said it was only on weekends and special occasions that she used her Brentwood home — a 4,000-square-foot residence with a swimming pool and tennis court that she and her husband have long owned. She said she lived at a 1,200-square-foot townhouse in Mar Vista, on a busy street just inside the border of her district.

But over a three-week period in which she was observed by Times reporters, Burke spent every weekday evening at her Brentwood house, in the district of Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky. When confronted by reporters Wednesday, Burke changed her story and acknowledged that she has rarely slept in the Mar Vista townhouse, which she has declared as her primary residence since she purchased it more than a year ago.

She conceded that the time she has actually spent there amounts to "maybe a month or two."

Asked whether voters would consider her primary residence as the place where she sleeps, Burke replied: "So I'll start sleeping here if that'll make you happy."

On Thursday — before this report was published — Burke issued a statement declaring that she has "always maintained my primary" residence within her district. And she accused Times reporters of accosting her during the sidewalk interview the day before.

In a telephone conversation with The Times later Thursday, Burke said she hoped to move into the Mar Vista townhouse as early as next week.

In order to hold their offices, the five supervisors, who preside over the nation's largest county government, are required by law to live in the districts they serve. If they don't,

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their office is deemed vacant. In some cases, politicians living outside their districts have been criminally prosecuted for perjury and election fraud. Government accountability experts say it is important that politicians live in the districts they represent so they better understand the issues of concern among their constituents.

Although questions about candidates' residency is fairly common in election campaigns, they are rare for county supervisors, whose districts are vast compared to those of most local elected officials.

Burke's District 2 encompasses 158 square miles and runs from Mar Vista to Lynwood, from downtown Los Angeles to the city of Carson. The district includes affluent areas, such as Ladera Heights, but also many neighborhoods facing chronic homelessness and disproportionately high rates of crime and unemployment.

Among the most difficult issues facing Burke's district is the possible closure of its county-run hospital, Martin Luther King Jr.-Harbor Medical Center. Years of medical lapses, including the deaths of patients, has left it facing a critical inspection this month to determine whether it can continue to receive federal funding.

Burke, who has said she won't seek reelection when her term expires in 2008, said Wednesday that she hadn't been staying at her townhouse much because she was having work done to "get it up to my par." The 74-year-old politician said she's painted the interior and remodeled the kitchen and "powder room."

Before buying the Mar Vista townhouse, Burke declared an apartment in West Los Angeles as her primary residence, but she acknowledged in the interview Wednesday that she slept there only "once in a while," staying instead at the Brentwood house.

Even though she spends the night in Brentwood, Burke said she felt she was fulfilling her residency requirement by visiting her townhouse in the mornings and evenings.

"I come here, my driver meets me here. I go in the house, I do whatever I have to do here," Burke said in an interview outside the Mar Vista home.

Excluding weekends, Burke said "there is not a day that I'm not here. Not one day.... Is that a crime?"

Each weekday morning that Times reporters watched from outside the Brentwood house, Burke got into her county-owned Chrysler 300 and drove the five miles to the townhouse, where her county-paid driver was waiting.

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Occasionally, Burke would pick up or drop off mail during the townhouse visits, which typically lasted less than five minutes.

Her driver would then take her the rest of the way to work at the County Hall of Administration in downtown Los Angeles.

In the evenings, the driver would chauffeur Burke back to the townhouse, where he would retrieve his personal vehicle and Burke would drive back in the 300 to the Brentwood house, often stopping at the home's gates to pick up mail delivered to that address.

In recent years, Los Angeles County Dist. Atty. Steve Cooley has successfully prosecuted several politicians for living outside their districts — in Huntington Park, South Gate and West Covina. Last month, prosecutors in San Francisco leveled criminal and civil charges against a county supervisor who they contend lives outside his constituency.

State and federal officeholders, who work in Sacramento or Washington, are given leeway in maintaining residences outside their districts. However, local politicians, who sit on school boards, city commissions and city councils, must also live in the areas they represent.

Los Angeles County supervisors are required by the charter to be registered voters in their districts and "reside therein during [their] incumbency." Under state law, an office becomes vacant if the elected officeholder does not live in the district.

Though widely popular among voters, some of Burke's critics have long accused her of being out of touch with the vast area of South Los Angeles she represents.

"It doesn't show a commitment on her part. Is she in the 2nd District or not in the 2nd District?" asked Frederick O. Murph, pastor of Brookins Community African Methodist Episcopal Church.

When Burke ran for supervisor 15 years ago, her opponent drew attention to her having just moved into the district from the Westside house, derisively calling her Yvonne "Brentwood" Burke.

Ever since, Burke has listed her address at various spots in the district. But it's unclear how long she has actually been living in Brentwood.

She and her husband, William A. Burke, the politically powerful chairman of the South Coast Air Quality Management District and president of the Los Angeles Marathon, have

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owned the Brentwood home since the 1980s. But financial disclosure forms show that the couple rented it out from 1993 until roughly 2002, the last renter being an adult film star who boasted in an interview with the online magazine Salon that he used the house to shoot pornographic movies.

The four-bedroom, five-bath house is surrounded by multimillion-dollar estates along winding Mandeville Canyon Road, just north of Sunset Boulevard and west of the Getty Center. Foliage shields the home from public view. The driveway entrance is gated.

While landlords in Brentwood, the Burkes lived at a Marina del Rey condo they owned. A year after Burke won a fourth board term in 2004, she and her husband sold the condo and filed voter registration papers saying they had moved to a small apartment in West Los Angeles, just within Burke's district boundaries.

In June of 2006, the Burkes purchased the Mar Vista townhouse. They registered to vote at the home, part of a peach-colored complex that overlooks Centinela Avenue, a four-lane street near the 10 Freeway. The townhouse lies on the very edge of her district — if the unit were across the street, it would be in Santa Monica and Yaroslavsky's district.

David Demerjian, who heads the district attorney's Public Integrity Division, said laws requiring politicians to live in their districts exist because residents expect their elected leaders "to have a stake in their communities."

Since 2001, the district attorney has filed charges of election fraud and perjury against four politicians who ran for office by falsely claiming to live in their respective districts. He said it is much more difficult to prosecute criminal cases in which the politician moved out of the district after legitimately living there at the time of an election. And, he said, it is hard to prove someone does not live in a district when he continues to maintain a residence there.

In such cases, Demerjian said, prosecutors can file civil lawsuits seeking to oust an elected leader from office. That route, he said, requires the approval of the state's attorney general's office.

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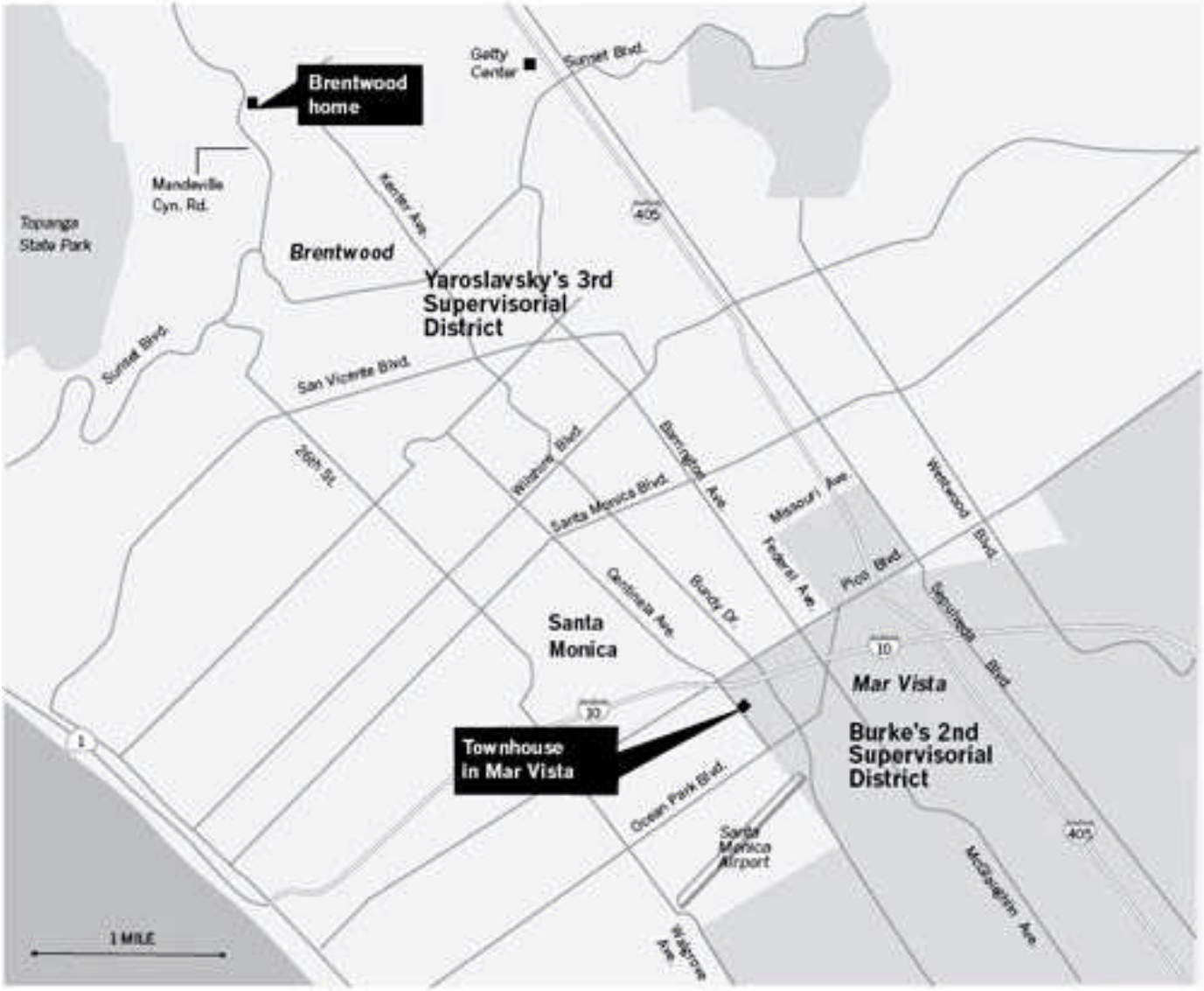
Different addresses

Although state and county law requires supervisors to live within their districts, Los Angeles County Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke acknowledges that she spends most nights at a home in Brentwood rather than at a townhouse she owns in Mar Vista. The Brentwood house is in the district of Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky.



Sources: Pictometry International; County of Los Angeles; Times reporting

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http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-burke27jul27_map,0,7848325.photo?coll=la-home-center, Tale of Two Homes

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http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-burke27jul27_j6j5bmnc,0,4678548.photo?coll=la-home-center, Yvonne Burke gets a hug from a supporter at the conclusion of a protest conference regarding the closure of King Drew gathered by two community groups. (Al Seib / LAT)

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Times researcher Maloy Moore contributed to this report.

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