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Thursday October 20, 2005

Jury probe sought on Conaway

By Elisabeth Sherwin/Enterprise staff writer

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Two weeks from today, Yolo County's eminent domain trial will begin, which will decide whether the county can buy private land - the Conaway Ranch - from an unwilling seller.

On Monday, the California Alliance to Protect Private Property Rights called upon the Yolo County grand

jury to investigate the Rumsey Tribe of Wintun Indians' agreement with the county to finance eminent domain proceedings against the unwilling sellers of 17,300-acre Conaway Ranch.

Former state Sen. Jim Nielsen of Woodland is the alliance chairman.

Also on Monday, Yolo County Supervisor Helen Thomson responded, saying she is not surprised the alliance is trying to influence public sentiment in the days leading up to the court hearing.

"I take their charges very seriously," Thomson said Monday. "I don't like being threatened but they are desperate."

The supervisor said members of the alliance are trying to connect the dots but weren't coming up with anything.

If the Superior Court judge hearing the case finds the county has a right to take the ranch via eminent domain, a jury trial will be held to determine the price the county will be asked to pay for the land.

The alliance objects to actions taken by the Yolo County Board of Supervisors in connection to the ranch. In May, two weeks to the day after the Yolo County Board of Supervisors approved a new 18-hole golf course for the Rumsey Tribe that owns Cache Creek Casino Resort, the tribe and county announced a historic partnership that included a gift or loan of \$50 million or more to finance the county's taking of Conaway Ranch.

However, the fact that the tribe wanted a golf course at the casino was no secret. It was known and discussed publicly in 2002 when the county/tribal agreement was signed, and at that time the tribe was told to follow the same procedures any other developer would follow.

The 2002 agreement was designed to reimburse the county and its communities from negative impacts from expansion of the Cache Creek Casino in Brooks.

The alliance says public documents reveal a sequence of events that could dispel the notion that the supervisors and the tribe agreed to a handshake deal earlier this year that sealed an agreement whereby the tribe will help the county finance the purchase of the Conaway Ranch.

Rather, the alliance suggests that the OK on the Cache Creek Casino golf course may have ratified the agreement to help the county buy the ranch.

The board's decision to develop prime farmland marked the second time in county history



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that farmland protections via Williamson Act contracts were removed from its General Plan.

Despite repeated denials by the negotiating parties that there was no backroom deal between the tribe and county, Yolo County has yet to disclose the nature of the agreement or partnership.

Since May, the public has been asked by supervisors to believe that no terms were negotiated and that the tribe simply agreed to contribute millions of dollars based on a handshake and a desire to see the land protected.

Not satisfied with this response, the Yolo County Taxpayers Association filed a public records request in May for county documents that could reveal the nature of the agreement. Despite legal requirements that the county respond to the request within 10 days, the request is five months old and the county has not produced any documents or said when it would produce responsive documents.

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Because the county failed to comply with the records request and to disclose the nature of the agreement, the alliance has called upon the grand jury to convene an investigation into the arrangement to determine whether the county engaged in a quid pro quo arrangement whereby the county asked the tribe for money to purchase Conaway Ranch in exchange for the county's agreement to approve the tribe's new golf course.

LOCAL LINKS

The alliance, founded by farmers and taxpayer advocates, is dedicated to exposing the abuses of eminent domain within the state. For more information, visit www.calpropertyrights.com.

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