

Article Last Updated: 10/27/2005 09:00 AM

## Confessions on Conaway

### The truth shall set county free

By JIM NIELSEN  
Daily Democrat

Can it be so? Are Yolo County leaders coming clean on their intentions about the Conaway Ranch? Some limited insight was gained in a Sacramento Bee article announcing a \$50,000 public relations campaign by Yolo County. The Rumsey Band of Wintun Indians is expanding its financial relationship with the county by funding this campaign. Supervisor Mike McGowan called this, "a contest for the hearts and minds of Yolo Citizens."

If the county had been up front all along there would be no need for explaining themselves with an expensive campaign that further put them in the Tribe's debt.

Yes, folks a debt. For the first time it was disclosed that the Rumsey Tribe expects the county to pay back any funds used to takeover the Conaway Ranch. Tribe attorney Howard Dickstein said, "The Tribe doesn't expect it (the Conaway seizure) will actually cost them money to help the county buy the Ranch since they would likely loan the county money and be paid back."

The county certainly has not disclosed more than that they have a "handshake deal" or that there was no deal. This current information warrants an explanation to the citizens of just how the county will pay back a \$60 million plus loan and maybe the additional money used for the public relation campaign.

The timing of the public relation campaign is curious in light of the county's long-standing silence and coming but two weeks before the county's eminent domain suit court date. Tribe spokesman Doug Elmets disingenuously explained, "The intent (of the campaign) is not to influence the legal process."

For nearly two years the county has been silent about its Conaway intentions hiding behind a purported legal veil imposed by their own actions. Now suddenly it's time to win our "hearts and minds?"

The county says it must respond to the public relation efforts of Conaway's owners. This assumption ignores that it has been the county's persistent and pervasive silence that prompted the growing concerns and questions of many Yolo County citizens and organizations. The county has refused to answer most of these questions.

The Bee article confirmed the suspicions that one of the county's goals is to secure Conaway water for Yolo County cities not for farming. Former supervisor Tom Stallard, a respected friend of mine and an eminent domain supporter, said, "If we don't make an effort to secure the rights to this water (Conaway Ranch) into perpetuity, we may never get a shot at it." Stallard was talking about water for cities, not farms. Supervisor McGowan said, "Water is critically important."

For months the county has protested it had no intentions of selling Conaway's water, ignoring county documents that indicated indeed water sales out of the county were being evaluated.

I have an additional Nov. 3, 2004 letter from Eric Robbins, a water resource consultant, to Sharon Jensen, assistant county administrative officer. Robbins proposes the "development of a water marketing plan."

Robbins wrote, "I am convinced that the acquisition of the Ranch can be fully paid by water supply agreements with the Joint Powers members and other water agencies outside Yolo County." This most recent document further confirms the county has considered water sales. Remember, in 1991 the county agreed to an outside transfer of county water supplies.

Supervisor McGowan also indicated the county was interested in "expanding the (Yolo) Bypass for flood protection." There is little to no likelihood of "expanding" the Bypass, but preserving its floodwater carrying capacity is a necessity. Unfortunately most of the county public records documents I've seen indicate designs by the county and its Joint Powers partners that would further restrict not expand - the floodwater carrying capacity of the Yolo Bypass.

The Rumsey Tribe has historically been good neighbor and generous, particularly with its recent donation to flood victims. I do not know their reasons for offering such significant financial support to the county. I do appreciate the disclosure by Mr. Dickstein that the Tribe is offering the county a loan. For months the county leaders would have us believe this was a "no strings" agreement. Now we know the county will accrue a huge debt if they succeed in their eminent domain suit.

Now more than ever, and before any resolution in the court, citizens deserve to know just how the county will repay this debt as well as how they would manage and maintain a 17,000-acre farm.

If the citizens had simply been regularly informed all along by county leaders, we would know what the supervisors may be obliging us to and we would have had an informed, rather than speculative, opportunity to offer our opinions and to protect ourselves and our resources.

*- Jim Nielsen is a former state senator who writes for The Daily Democrat.*