

Article Last Updated: 11/27/2005 08:44 AM

Conaway legal costs climb for county

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Yolo County has now spent nearly \$1 million pursuing a Conaway Ranch takeover, and that amount could continue to rise.

As of mid-November, the total bill was \$970,032.29, with the bulk of that spent on legal costs. The county has hired two Sacramento law firms - Somach, Simmons and Dunn and Miller, Owen and Trost - for its eminent domain lawsuit against the owners of the 17,300-acre Conaway Ranch.

Howard Newens, auditor-controller for Yolo County, said the \$830,747.46 of the bill had gone to legal costs, primarily the contract with Somach, Simmons and Dunn. Another \$137,361.59 has been spent on professional services related to the acquisition, such as land appraisals, financial consultants and public relations. The balance was spent on transportation and office expenses, Newens said.

District 5 Supervisor Duane Chamberlain, the only takeover opponent on the Board of Supervisors, called the money "a waste" and said both sides would be better-served if they could hash out a deal without resorting to court.

Dudley Holman, president of the Yolo County Taxpayer's Association, suggested the money would have been better spent on "serious, crying needs" like road repair and filling personnel vacancies in the county.

Chamberlain was not on the board when the supervisors voted unanimously to pursue the ranch.

District 4 Supervisor Mariko Yamada was, and she suggested the board's resolve had not changed.

"The county has committed itself to this effort, and frankly, to do whatever it takes," she said. Yamada agreed a deal negotiated between the county and owners would have been preferable, but noted talks fell apart in September before the first court date. The right-to-take trial has begun and will continue at 10:30 a.m. on Tuesday in Department Two of Yolo County Superior Court.

But even when the trial ends, it is likely the matter will continue. First, there is the possibility of a valuation hearing if Judge Tim Fall rules in the county's favor. A jury would be convened to set the purchase price of the ranch - estimated to be \$60 million or more.

Beyond that, the appeals process could also be expensive and lengthy. One supervisor indicated in October that the county would likely appeal if it lost in court, and many believe the landowners would launch an appellate fight of their own.

The county is seeking to take the ranch because it fears the current ownership group - led by Sacramento developer Steve Gidaro - will attempt to develop part of the land or sell off its water rights.

The owners, who bought the land after eminent domain was already under way, say they do not want to change the property.

The other three supervisors, all supporters of the takeover effort, could not be reached for comment.

"Our issues are the same as they were (at the initial vote) - protecting this last and largest piece of

open space in Yolo County," Yamada said.

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