

Conaway acquisition defended at forum

By Cory Golden/Enterprise staff writer

WOODLAND - Yolo County Supervisors Mike McGowan and Mariko Yamada on Wednesday defended the board's \$1 million-and-counting effort to acquire Conaway Ranch.

Speaking before about 100 people at the Yolo County Farm Bureau, they offered no new details about the county's deal with the Rumsey Band of Wintun Indians, which has agreed to bankroll the deal, or how the ranch would be managed.

In December, the county won the right to purchase the 17,300-acre ranch east of Davis and Woodland via eminent domain.

A valuation trial is set for June 13 to determine how much the county will have to pay the Conaway Preservation Group. The ranch, with its 50,000 acre-feet of water rights, is estimated to be worth anywhere from \$60 million to \$400 million.

In attempting to justify the effort, McGowan continued to paint the ownership group of prominent developers as wolves in sheep's clothing - or, in this case, blue jeans and duck-hunting gear.

"I'm sorry, but Steve Gidaro, Jack Sweigart and Carl Panattoni are not doing this to make some sort of statement about eminent domain," McGowan said. "They bought it once we'd begun the process because it was a good business deal. The rest is smoke and mirrors.

"You guys are farmers - you're worried about the government taking your land - but this is what they do all the time. This is who they are," he continued. "I don't think (the board would) ever condemn a property owned by a Yolo farmer.

"This is a fight, folks, it's not about personal property rights - it's about our way of life in Yolo County."

The group of owners completed their purchase of the land in December 2004. That came four months after the county board voted to adopt an eminent domain resolution in hopes of acquiring the land, supervisors said, to maintain the status quo.

Yamada said again Wednesday that they were forced to make the move, because the county could not legally take part in a closed bidding process to buy the land from the previous owners.

Tovey Giezentanner, spokesman for the landowners, talked about what he said were the troubling implications of the court decision for private property rights. None of the ranch's owners attended the town hall-style meeting.

Giezentanner stressed their commitment to preserving the land. They have maintained they would make money by continuing to lease ground to farmers, creating a “mitigation bank” for developers who need to compensate for lost land or habitat elsewhere, through the sale of conservation easements permanently limiting development and through “limited water sales to local partners.”

“There's nothing in the public record to justify the claim they're going to rape and pillage this land,” Giezentanner said.

McGowan shot back that owners had testified they joined in the purchase, in part, because of the lucrative water rights.

At another point, he said Gidaro has plans to develop other parcels of land in the county.

“He sat in my office and made me the pitch,” the supervisor said.

“And what did you tell him?” Giezentanner asked.

“I told him to get the hell out of Yolo County,” McGowan said.

Despite the sometimes heated words, the audience may well have left with as many questions as they came in with.

Among them, for example: How can the county and its partners in the Joint Powers Authority (UC Davis, the cities and the Yolo County Flood Control Agency) manage the land when they are bound to contract with the low bidder, not the best farmer?

Yamada was booed when she answered one questioner who asked about the county's business plan.

“I expect you to trust that a business plan will be developed,” she said.

Others snickered when she said the board would bring in experts to help. She said she did not rule out working with the ranch's current managers.

The supervisors also were asked repeatedly how the tribe, with its own varied businesses and property holdings, was different than a developer.

“I view (the tribal council) as another local government in Yolo County,” McGowan said, again to audible grumbling.

On the tribe's commitment to back the land purchase, McGowan said again no details have been hammered out.

“This is one that people don't accept, because it sounds implausible, but it's true,” he said.

Neither side would promise the land would never be developed or that water would never be sold.

McGowan said that it's appropriate that, over time, the makeup of the Board of Supervisors changes and that policies may someday change. But both he and Yamada noted the county's long-standing goal of ag land preservation.

Giezentanner said the owners couldn't make such a commitment because of the court proceedings.

They hope a jury will place the cost of the ranch out of reach of the county, he said. Failing that, the owners don't want to devalue the land, diminishing the return on their investment, by agreeing the land could never be developed.

Both sides signaled a willingness to negotiate Wednesday, but the supervisors noted talks have collapsed before.

The group has suggested a split in ownership with the county. The current owners would manage the ranch and a public process would build in more certainty about protecting the ranch and its resources.

“We remain hopeful that there's a compromise opportunity, keeping the land in private ownership but with stricter county controls over the land and water,” Giezentanner said.

Yamada said the difference between the sides remains motivation.

“It boils down to a philosophical difference,” she said. “The county is not going to change its resolve that the public interest is best served by public ownership.”

Wednesday night's town hall meeting was sponsored by Woodlanders for Responsible Government, a nonpartisan organization.

- Reach Cory Golden at cgolden@davisenterprise.net or 747-8046.

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