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Breaking the Silence

County offers no answers on Conaway

By DUDLEY HOLMAN
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For more than a year, Yolo County denied citizen requests for a public forum on its decision to use eminent domain to seize the Conaway Ranch.

Their silence came to an end earlier this month when supervisors Mike McGowan and Mariko Yamada addressed the Woodlanders for Responsible Government.

While the supervisors should be congratulated for appearing before an audience of skeptical constituents, no one could understand the county's justification for seizing a 17,000-acre ranch from its unwilling sellers. By evening's end, there were no noticeable converts to defend the county's action. This may have been in part because the supervisors artfully dodged several critical questions and offered no new answers to a well informed public frustrated with the county's total disregard for local private property rights and misuse of tax dollars.

During the public forum the county made the case repeatedly that the ranch would best protected under public rather than private ownership. To their embarrassment, critics cited that the Yolo Grand Jury is investigating the county's housing agency for mismanagement, fraud and embezzlement. The federal government will also consider investigating the county for allowing gang members to live in federally funded housing - something strictly prohibited. If the county can't manage its existing agencies, local farmers asked how it can make a 17,000-acre ranch profitable.

Members of the audience asked how the financially troubled county who furloughs public employees to balance budgets can purchase a ranch valued at \$60 million to \$100 million - or even more. The county answered that the Rumsey Tribe, owners of the Cache Creek Casino Resort, is loaning the county millions to finance the taking of the ranch.

However, the county skirted the question of how the county intended to repay the loan. Will existing programs be cut? What about tax increases? If the county defaults on the loan, would the tribe become the owners of land perfectly located for a mega-casino minutes from Sacramento? This is not a far-fetched concern given that the county supports claims that the ranch is the tribe's ancestral land.

The county justifies the taking to prohibit development on the ranch. However, the crowd pointed out that most of the ranch can't be developed since it is located within the Yolo Bypass - meaning the ranch is underwater a good time of the year. Moreover, the ranch can't be rezoned for housing without the approval of the Board of Supervisors. While repeatedly calling the ranch owners "dirt peddlers" and businessmen with interests in developing the ranch, Supervisor McGowan could not promise the audience that the county would never develop the land. This is something to think about long and hard next time the county professes using your tax dollars to prevent development on the Conaway Ranch.

The taking of Conaway Ranch has been reported as case of eminent domain abuse by leading state and local newspapers - for it is not every day that gambling profits are used by government to seize private property. What the county terms as a "partnership" with the tribe concerned many when told that the terms of the tribe's loan and the final cost of the ranch will not be known until the court awards the ranch to the county. The

audience found pleas by supervisors to "trust" their decision to keep the terms of the agreement secret totally unacceptable. For the audience did not forget that it was not long ago that the tribe offered financial assistance to the county two weeks after the county approved their casino's controversial plan to build an 18-hole golf course on prime farmland.

While Supervisor McGowan hailed the tribe's loan as a "stringless deal," and its timing a coincidence, others are not so sure.

The forum allowed the public the benefit of learning how their county government functions and what it deems appropriate for them to know.

Unlike the county, no prospective homeowner would ever put an offer on a home before knowing the terms of their loan and the asking price. But, this is not the way government works in Yolo County.

The political pressure for Yolo County to abandon the taking is building so much so that the San Francisco Chronicle recently quoted a supervisor saying, "I've got some news for you," countered (Mike) McGowan, "after going through this, it is highly unlikely I will ever do this again."

It is not too late for Yolo County to abandon its taking of private property from the ranch's unwilling sellers. For this to happen, they need to hear from you. Speak up and defend Conaway Ranch from county land grabs.

Who knows, your home, small business or family farm could be next.

- *Dudley Holman is president of the Yolo County Taxpayers Association and former Woodland mayor.*