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Future of Conaway Ranch under discussion

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As Yolo County moves closer to a June court date that would set the price of the Conaway Ranch, the Davis-based environmental group Tuleyome held a workshop based on a seemingly simple question: What should be done with the ranch once it's in public hands?

And although they compiled a substantial list of ideas, much of the talk bogged down in debate over the wisdom, legality and morality of the cash-poor county taking land from private owners.

"We realize that many in this room feel like this is the wrong way," said Tuleyome President Bob Schneider at the beginning of the workshop. "(But) this is not the debate about the merits of the action; This is planning for the assumption that it will happen and to engage the community sooner, rather than later."

The idea was to brainstorm potential uses for the 16,000-acre ranch east of Woodland, whether they be continued farming, recreation, agro-tourism or habitat restoration. Organizers acknowledged that much of the audience opposed the county seizing the ranch through eminent domain, but said they wanted to focus on finding the best use for the land if it is taken.

For example, Schneider said he wanted to see more mountain bike and pedestrian access to the sprawling ranch of rice fields and alfalfa.

City dwellers suggested variously the Davis wetlands be expanded dramatically, that Davis, Woodland and West Sacramento be able to use some of the water on the ranch and that the flood control potential of the Yolo Bypass be enhanced.

A commonly stated theme was that pressure to build would continue to increase over the next 50 years - the time given for these hypothetical changes- and a solution is needed to keep the ranch undeveloped.

Among several suggestions was the idea that the county should immediately take out agriculture easements on the property, which would prevent development regardless of who owns the ranch in the future.

Andrew Fulks, one of the organizers of the event, said the ideas would be compiled and presented to the Board of Supervisors.

One reminder the board probably won't need is of the controversy surrounding the purchase. Thursday's crowd seemed roughly split between supporters who do not trust the developer-owners - and vehement opponents who blasted the county for, well, virtually everything.

Rice growers Tim Miramontes and Mark Breckenridge were also among the critics who attended the meeting. Breckenridge suggested the ranch would be best served in 50 years if it stays with its current owners.

Conaway Preservation Group spokesman Tovey Gizentanner questioned the entire purpose of the workshop, noting the county cited preservation of the "status quo" as its legal reason for the seizure.

"If they wanted to take it for a park-slash-farm, then they should say they're taking it for a park-slash-farm," he said.

In his concluding statement, Schneider noted that his group had been largely unable to get past the seizure of the ranch, but had agreed on one thing.

"We agreed there needs to be a good process for everyone to be included (on deciding the future of the ranch)," he said.

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