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Yolo race keys on Conaway Ranch fight

By Erika Chavez -- Bee Staff Writer

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The battle over Conaway Ranch's future, flood control and growth are the issues at the forefront as 3rd District voters in Yolo County voters decide June 6 who should represent them on the Board of Supervisors.

Incumbent Frank Sieferman Jr. faces two challengers: Woodland Mayor Matt Rexroad and community activist Brenda Cedarblade.

The incumbent readily acknowledges that one issue continues to overshadow all others: the county's ongoing push to buy Conaway Ranch through eminent domain.

"It is a very, very large elephant in the room," Sieferman said.

The 17,300-acre property, a vast parcel of farmland stretching south from Interstate 5, is rich in habitat and holds a valuable 50,000 acre-feet of water rights. Yolo supervisors have waged a protracted legal battle with the site's owners, a group of investors led by Sacramento developer Steve Gidaro.

The county has accused Gidaro's group of planning to develop the land and sell the water rights to outside interests; Gidaro's group insists it will preserve the land as open space.

Sieferman says that while his constituents have disapproved of the county's use of eminent domain, they are even more passionate about open space.

"In talking to voters, they tell me they find it very distasteful when government uses eminent domain," he said. "Yet they find it very troublesome that the land may be removed from agriculture and the water may be exported. So even though they don't like eminent domain, they can accept its usage."

The supervisor said he is hopeful that the elephant can still be laid to rest: The county and the developers are trying to reach a deal that would take the need for eminent domain off the table. If no settlement is reached, a jury trial is set for June 13.

A highlight of his term, Sieferman said, is the ongoing construction of a new Health and Mental Services building.

If re-elected, Sieferman said he hopes to continue working on land-use amendments to the county's general plan; regional water and regional flood protection issues; and developing new landfill processes that could turn garbage into energy.

"I'm trying to encompass the city-county discussion," he said. "Cities and counties need to be partners in the end. Neither one can stand alone."

Sieferman, a Vietnam veteran who joined the board in 2002, faces stiff competition in Rexroad, a political consultant and recent Iraq war veteran who has been busily raising money, racking up endorsements and campaigning for Measure A, which would create an "urban limit line," or city boundaries that only voters can amend. District 3 encompasses the city of Woodland.

Rexroad, who has been a Woodland City Council member since 2002, said his town has not received adequate representation on the Board of Supervisors.

"We have no voice on the board," said Rexroad, who owns Meridian Pacific, a political consulting firm.

Rexroad boasts a diverse coalition of supporters - "people who don't agree on anything, but they agree that I would be the best representative," he said. He has a slick Web page with a blog updated several times a day. If elected, Rexroad said, he will continue to blog as part of his commitment to make himself available to constituents.

He also wants speedier board meetings; currently they can run as long as six to eight hours. "I don't think that's the way people expect their government to work," he said. "That's inefficient."

As mayor of Woodland, Rexroad helped bring a Costco to the town; helped pass a school bond; took a pay cut as part of larger cost-cutting measures to increase public safety; and raised money to help the family of a fallen Marine buy a home. Rexroad is against the use of eminent domain to acquire Conaway Ranch and says a negotiated settlement would be the best resolution for all parties.

The challenger also takes pride in the Wayfarer Center, a homeless shelter on Court Street that caused some controversy. "We built a beautiful facility to serve people and provide a social safety net within Woodland," Rexroad said.

Fellow challenger Cedarblade spearheaded an effort to restrict who could stay at the Wayfarer Center. That's one of many issues she has spoken out on as a community activist.

"We wanted a conditional use permit that would restrict violent criminals and child molesters from staying at the center, and we lost," said Cedarblade, who said she was representing a group of nearby residents and business owners concerned about safety.

Cedarblade owns the Tack Warehouse on Main Street, and with her husband is restoring the historic Nelson Ranch. She is not a politician and entered the race because she feels strongly about guiding the direction of her community, she said. Cedarblade said she wants to prevent any development in floodplains; she's concerned about the possibility of runaway growth and wants to preserve Yolo County's open space.

"I want to make sure our agricultural land is protected, and that we maintain the rural heritage of our community," she said.

Flood control is also key, Cedarblade said, and fixing Cache Creek is imperative. "We've gone from 30-year level protection down to 15 because it has been improperly maintained," she said. "I want to secure state and federal funding and work with experts to fix the creek."

Like Rexroad, Cedarblade opposes the use of eminent domain at Conaway Ranch.

"It's a black eye for Yolo County," she said. "If we take it by eminent domain, it sets a precedent in law that can be used against farmers across the United States."

About the writer:

- The Bee's Erika Chavez can be reached at (916) 321-1016 or echavez@sacbee.com.

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