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Managing Conaway

Can supervisors plow a straight furrow?

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"Can they plow a straight furrow?"

This was my friend Ben's (a farm employee) test for a good farmer. It's a question applicable to Yolo County Supervisors as they negotiate to acquire from maybe willing sellers (I use acquire for now since the county stopped their the eminent domain suit) the Conaway Ranch.

Our supervisors have offered only platitudes and generalities, idle speculation and flip statements to justify their eminent domain suit. Some have cavalierly implied county leaders would be more able stewards of a vast farming operation than private owners. For the past year supervisors have been unable define actions by past or current Conaway owners that give cause for public ownership nor have they demonstrated any ability to run a farm. Only Supervisor Duane Chamberlain manages a successful farming enterprise.

I have farmed a 200-acre ranch and I've been a ranch foreman on a 33,000-acre ranch. My days were 14 plus hours year around of frenetic activity and worry. Managing a farm cannot be accomplished while wrestling with county budget deficits, unfunded state mandates and employee furloughs or running for election.

"Plowing a straight furrow" implies knowing how to farm, which means the ability to manage countless resources - natural, man-made and human - while being able to deal with the unpredictable acts of nature. How will supervisors and their partners manage this ranch and fulfill their fiduciary responsibility to the taxpayers?

It is overdue for the supervisors and their Conaway Ranch Joint Powers Authority partners to disclose how they intend to pay for, manage and keep solvent a 17,000-acre ranch. As to paying for the ranch, what are the terms if the Rumsey Tribe of Wintun Indians is financing the deal. What are the terms, conditions and obligations the county is assuming for this financing?

Of the JPA members only, the county has expended funds on eminent domain (in excess on \$1 million) and only the Rumsey Tribe has the funds to finance the Conaway deal. The cities are admittedly along for the ride, but they lack financial deep pockets and have no intentions to provide any funding for acquisition or operating expenses. In farming there are bad years. What will Yolo County and the JPA rely on in times of bad weather and low prices?

In fact, the county's chronic budget struggles give cause to doubt the County's ability to pay for or manage a ranch. Would any bank lend \$60 million to \$80 million to a farmer that was \$4 million in the red?

Additional insight is afforded by a recent Sacramento Bee article about the Ports of Stockton and Sacramento by Jim Wasserman titled, "Stockton thrives; Sacramento dives." One of the key differences between these Ports is governance. Two bankers, an energy technician, a transportation consultant, and two lawyers direct the Port of Stockton. Three county supervisors and four city council members direct the Port of Sacramento. One is basically private and the other public. One is profitable and the other is losing more than a million a year.

According to Wasserman, "The Port of Stockton boosted its finances; from \$14 million a year to \$28 million this year, while The Port of Sacramento languishes without real estate earnings, having lost \$5.5 million in the last five years." Wasserman's article goes on to state, "The Port of Stockton, overseen by seven private sector commissioners appointed by its home city and county, is optimistic and brash, viewing itself as a major new hub of job creation for the San Joaquin Valley. The Port of Sacramento, overseen by seven elected public officials appointed by four sparring regional governments, is plagued by debt, melancholy about its future and fighting for its life."

The latter description applies to Yolo County and the JPA concocted by the County to run the Conaway Ranch. All current members of the JPA are government entities. A potential member owns a gambling casino. One member, the county, is suing another, the city of Woodland, and is leveraging long-standing tax sharing agreements with both Woodland and Davis. UC Davis, another JPA member, has not indicated why it wants the Conaway Ranch nor have Yolo County cities and the Rumsey Tribe.

Yolo County leaders have not "plowed a straight furrow" with the citizens about their motives and plans for obligating the taxpayers to such an enormous financial risk. Their fiscal track record does not yield confidence they can run a county or a port let alone a 17,000-acre ranch.

- Jim Nielsen is a former state senator who writes for The Daily Democrat.