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Chamber leaders promise neutral stance on SSJID, PG&E struggle

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Manteca Chamber of Commerce's leadership is vowing to remain neutral in the power struggle between South San Joaquin Irrigation District and PG&E.

That was enough for the SSJID board to vote 3-1 vote Tuesday - with chairman Dale Kuil dissenting - to rejoin the chamber they quit 31 months ago after the business organization sided with PG&E without giving SSJID a chance to make their case in their drive to take over the retail power system in Manteca, Ripon, and Escalon. The SSJID's goal is to reduce power rates across the board by at least 15 percent and modernize the system.

The board did more than just join as a basic member. That would have cost \$625 a year. Instead, they opted for the President's Circle at a \$2,500 annual level of sponsorship. The upgraded membership provides the SSJID with tickets to numerous chamber events and entry into the chamber's Christmas parade. General Manager Jeff Shields said the SSJID would probably end up supporting those endeavors anyway making the \$2,500 membership a better deal.

It also will get the SSJID promoted at all chamber events.

Chamber Executive Director Debby Moorhead promised that the chamber - which has new board leadership - would remain neutral on the PG&E-SSJID struggle.

Moorhead in April 2006 - while serving as chamber executive director - assumed the leadership of Stop the Power Grab. It is a PG&E backed organization that is fighting the SSJID's efforts to enter the retail power business. Moorhead made it clear she was driven by loyalty as her father had worked for PG&E.

The chamber board also took a position against any public agency using eminent domain to take over private property and sent the position to the San Joaquin Local Agency Formation Commission at the same time SSJID was advancing their request to get approval to enter the retail business. PG&E representative Emily Barnett, who served on the chamber board at the time, made sure her employers' interests were advanced in the chamber resolution while working with other board members to block input from SSJID.

Moorhead - as well as current President Kirk Dall - apologized to the SSJID board for the incidents that also included a raucous luncheon the chamber had invited SSJID to explain their position after coming out against the agency.

SSJID Director Dave Kamper Tuesday wanted to know if any of the chamber members who quit in protest over SSJID's treatment had rejoined the chamber. Moorhead said the five - which included Tipton's, Oliver-Simas Insurance and dentist Ricardo Cuevas - have not rejoined.

Kamper had expressed concern that SSJID rejoining when others stood up for the agency by quitting may not be appropriate.

SSJID director John Holbrook noted the networking with local business - among those SSJID wants to lower electrical power rates for - was invaluable to its effort to move forward with the district's retail plan.

SSJID marketing specialist Troylene Saylor noted that as the SSJID marks its 100th anniversary as well as stepping up its efforts to educate people on the need to use water wisely membership would benefit the district.

Dall noted that the chamber - which is turning 85 years old this year - and the district have a long history of working together. He said the new leadership was anxious to put the incident behind them and to work with the SJJID for the common goal of improving the Manteca area economy.

Kamper argued that being a member gives SSJID an equal footing with their competitor - PG&E - to make their case with individual chamber members.

"I thought we were supposed to have an equal footing as a member back then," Kuil countered.

In a memo to the board, SJJID General Manager Jeff Shields noted the board dropped its long-time membership "due to several incidents that indicated hostility and a lack of impartiality by the chamber's management toward SSJID's retail electric plan."

Shields said he understands that the incidents were damaging to the SSJID's previously positive relationship with the chamber, "there is currently an opportunity to put the past behind us and begin to foster a constructive association with the chamber and its membership for the good of the district and its public information goals."

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