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Thaw in SSJID & chamber relationship?

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It's easy to understand why the South San Joaquin Irrigation District's relationship with the Manteca Chamber of Commerce - a business organization that traces its roots back to the same group of community leaders who formed the water agency - has been in deep freeze mode for 31 months.

Back in April of 2006, a number of events happened that prompted the SSJID to drop its membership.

First, Manteca Chamber of Commerce Chief Executive Director Debby Moorhead assumed the leadership of Stop the Power Grab - a PG&E backed organization that was 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. Moorhead, by the way, could secure a seat on the Manteca City Council when all of the votes left to be counted are tabulated. She trailed incumbent Jack Snyder by seven votes after the count on Tuesday.

Then there was a chamber meeting at Chez Shari where the chamber had invited the SSJID to provide the program that turned into an unruly shouting match involving PG&E supporters. Several longtime chamber members dropped their association with the business organization to protest how the SSJID speaker Jeff Shields - who is now general manager - was treated.

Topping that off, the chamber board 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. Incidentally, Snyder - who is leading Moorhead at this point - is the Manteca representative on the LAFCO board and would play a pivotal role if he ends up being re-elected to the council when the SSJID proposal returns for another try.

Now, the SSJID staff is suggesting its time to let bygones be bygones and move ahead.

Shields, who was the target at the chamber meeting that created such an uproar, is suggesting his governing board rejoin the chamber.

The board will consider the issue at Tuesday's SSJID meeting taking place at 9 a.m. at the district office, 11011 East Highway 120.

In a memo, 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 eclectic 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."

Shields noted that he - along with SSJID's marketing head Troylene Saylor - have met with Moorhead who expressed regret for the past situations.

Shields said Moorhead told them the board is all new and would welcome the SSJID back and "reassured us that there would never be a repeat of the attitudes inside the chamber that lead to the past problems."

Shields said Saylor as well as power systems manager Don Battles- a past president of the chamber - will be responsible for managing the district's relationship with the chamber.

Shields is recommending the board secure a President's Circle membership costing \$2,500.

The Stop the Power Grab letter that started the series of events had Moorhead stating, "As CEO of the Manteca Chamber, it is my responsibility to look out for the well being of our business community. And that is why I have decided, in addition to my current role with the Chamber, to join the Citizens to Stop the Power Grab."

Moorhead further stated in the letter a PG&E position that "an SSJID takeover will increase our electric rates by as much as 15 percent" which runs contrary to SSJID contentions that the Manteca-based irrigation district can lower rates by at least 15 percent.

Moorhead also made reference to a chamber adopted resolution opposing the use of eminent domain to forcefully take possession of a private business.

Emily Barnett, who was the incoming treasurer for the chamber organization at the time, is in charge of PG&E's government affairs and works with local jurisdictions.

Barnett interrupted Shields several times during his April 2006 presentation at the chamber luncheon to take him to task and during the Q&A session essentially accused Shields and SSJID of lying. Barnett played a role in drafting the chamber resolution as well as getting Moorhead to get involved with Stop the Power Grab.

Shields, at the time, noted, "The chamber has never contacted myself or the SSJID for information regarding (the district's rationale on) eminent domain before they took their vote."

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