

# The Davis Enterprise

## Forum

WEDNESDAY, MAY 17, 2006

### Put the brakes on Conaway purchase

**stubborn:** (stub' rn) adj.  
*unreasonably obstinate in purpose  
as a course of action.*

**T**here is a cliff dead ahead. Signs everywhere suggest that we should stop and go back. Rocks plunging into the canyon below are clearly audible. And yet, step by step, we keep going.

Neither reason nor persuasive argument can get us off this path. We are determined to move forward, if for no other reason than we believed it was the right route when we started.

Yolo County, like a mule on a suicide mission, will not give up its efforts to forcibly purchase Conaway Ranch.

Yet a reasonable analysis of the facts suggests that our Board of Supervisors is making a mistake. The eminent domain action against the Conaway Preservation Group carries with it unbelievably huge costs and zero tangible benefits.

It's not just that the supervisors have spent almost \$2 million in legal bills. Let me repeat that: \$2 million just for the lawyers. At \$25 each, that would have purchased 80,000 books for our county libraries.

Or that hundreds of hours of staff time have been consumed by this quixotic quest. Or that hundreds of thousands of dollars more will be spent by the county before the last argument is decided in this proceeding.

It's that at the end of the road, when Yolo County finally owns the 17,244-acre ranch, nothing will be gained. The public interest will not have been served. And we will face a whopping \$508,581 annual hole



in our budget due to the loss of property tax revenues.

The county contends that the purchase price of the ranch will be \$60 million. To finance that, our supervisors will borrow the money from the Rumsey Band of Wintun Indians. There is no agreement about what interest rate the Rumsey tribe will charge the taxpayers. However, if it is anything over 4.07 percent, then the net income from the ranch — around \$3.5 million per year — will be insufficient to pay the principal and the interest on the loan.

**T**he county says no money from the General Fund will finance this purchase. But that is impossible if the lenders charge a market-based interest rate. At 8 percent, the current prime rate, the county would have to make annual payments of \$5.3 million for the next 30 years. That would mean a deficit of at least another \$1.8 million every year for the foreseeable future.

If the jury decides that Conaway is worth \$100 million, as Woodland Mayor Matt Rexroad believes, then the annual payments deficit will rise to \$5.4 million per year, and that doesn't include the half-million dollars lost in property taxes. It's the equivalent of burning 236,000

library books every year.

So what do the supervisors claim we will gain from this ploy?

They say, first, it will guarantee that the land will remain agricultural, that this jewel will not be turned into houses, hotels or hospitals. But that's an empty promise. All of Conaway is zoned for agricultural uses. No one but the supervisors can change that. If they don't want any of the ranch developed, just leave the zoning in place.

Even if the county buys the Conaway Ranch, nothing will stop a future board from changing the zoning. In fact, it's more likely that development will occur on this property if the supervisors buy it, because Yolo County is going to have to pay off that massive mortgage. Subsequent supervisors will be tempted to develop Conaway to ease their debt burden.

Second, the board says we need to buy Conaway to control its water resources. Beth Gabor, the county's public information officer, told me in an e-mail, "The county is not confident that private owners will protect and preserve the values of the ranch and won't sell the water to fill swimming pools in L.A."

That doesn't wash. Not one drop of water has been sold from the Conaway Ranch for the last 14 years. And even if they had some extra water, why wouldn't they just sell it to Davis and Woodland? Rather than malign the current owners for filling some hypothetical natatoria, the county should be negotiating with the CPG to buy its available water, if it's needed here.

Third, it is claimed that the coercive acquisition of Conaway Ranch will make this farmland available to

the public. But that is untrue. Gabor told me, "The county currently has no plans to convert (Conaway) farmland to a wildlife reserve or park."

All of the acreage that is now farmed will continue to be leased to farmers once the county grabs the land. As such, it will remain quasi-private property. Hunters now lease some of the farmland during flood season, and presumably that will continue if the county takes over the ranch. Conaway is not going to become a public park.

**F**inally, it is said that the supervisors need to buy the ranch because of their superior "ability to manage natural resources for environmental purposes." That's a dubious claim. Where is the evidence which suggests that the county has a better environmental record than the Conaway Preservation Group?

Conaway has an established environmental record, one that goes back 15 years under its current management plan. CPG has encouraged environmentally sensitive farming practices on the ranch, including its usage of the water resources.

All we can do at this point is beg our supervisors to put on the brakes. If you would prefer Yolo County put this money into our health clinics, libraries and roads, tell the board to stop, now. Otherwise, we're about to fall into a deep depression that we might not be able to get out of.

— Rich Rifkin is a Davis resident; his column appears every other week. Reach him at [Lxartist@yahoo.com](mailto:Lxartist@yahoo.com)