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Cunning County

Fast one pulled for Conaway Ranch

By Jim Nielsen
Daily Democrat

The actions of Yolo County supervisors over the past few weeks are captured in this mock classified ad.

FOR SALE: Yolo County Land

Price: Best Offer

Includes: Land, water, gas, mineral rights, farm lands suitable for conversion to golf courses, recreational uses, development, division and sale.

Contact: Yolo County Supervisors

Last week, Yolo County supervisors stood united in a press conference shamelessly announcing a "Historic New Partnership" with the Rumsey Band of Wintun Indians. The county gets Cache Creek Casino money or backing to bankroll its \$60 to \$80 million eminent domain seizure of the Conaway Ranch. The Rumsey Band gets unprecedented inclusion as a member of the temporarily defunct Conaway Ranch Joint Powers Authority (if authorized by legislation).

Adding to the shamelessness this "partnership" was consummated but two weeks after the county and the tribe married up in a sweetheart deal to break a Williamson Act contract for only the second time in county history. Without the required withdrawal penalty but with a million dollar "donation" to the county, the Cache Creek Casino can now build a golf course on prime farmland. Does anyone believe there is no connection?

At a community forum sponsored by Woodlanders For Responsible Government one questioner asked Supervisor Frank Siefertman, "Do you think you'd have had that press conference (with the Rumsey Band) yesterday if you had not approved the golf course last week?"

Supervisors Siefertman and Dwayne Chamberlain could not explain any terms of the agreement, lamely offering, "Nothing is worked out yet." Would any prudent business person or an accountable elected official proceed with a financial obligation of this magnitude with no business plan, with no financing terms secured and no management structure in place or in process? The county is going to owe the Rumsey Tribe a whole lot for underwriting/funding the \$60 to \$80 million Conaway hostile take over. The golf course deal is not going to be enough.

The deafening silence about the terms of the "Historic New Partnership" emulates the secrecy throughout the Conaway Ranch eminent domain action and related to the Joint Powers Authority. Supervisors and Joint Powers Authority members have consistently professed an appalling lack of knowledge about relationships, responsibilities, liabilities and obligations related to the Conaway Ranch as well as about documents that were generated to apprise supervisors of their options and opportunities.

Just what are the common interests of Yolo County and the Cache Creek Casino? County documents dealing with the Conaway Ranch assets that the county covets as well as the joint county/tribe press release affirms lusty mutual goals; 125,000 cumulative acre-feet of water rights, ground water access, gas wells and land. Anyone who thinks the "partners" are motivated to preserve agriculture need but ponder the county's Williamson Act action to allow the casino to build a golf course and the non farming uses of Conaway Ranch assets the county's own documents disclose.

Over the months the county has failed, really not even tried, to demonstrate any reasons why public ownership is superior to private. This is particularly proven by county documents that suggest the county is considering exactly what they accuse private owners of possibly doing.

By accepting the tribe as a financing partner by the means and on terms undisclosed, preceded by the "golf course" deal, the county shreds the last vestige of its carefully sewn cloak of noble purpose. This has and will remain about money. The county needs budget money and assets. It is clear that the Cache Creek Casino needed Williamson Act land, will benefit from county indebtedness, from the tangible, particularly water, resources of the Conaway Ranch and from being the first tribe to achieve local government status.

The citizens of Yolo County deserve to know the financial and legal liabilities they, as taxpayers, will be subjected to. They deserve disclosure of agreements some county supervisors are negotiating. They deserve the opportunity to review and comment on any agreements these supervisors are committing to and public votes of supervisors on the agreements.

This "historic" scam should raise eyebrows all over California. Local government is leaping into land speculation invoking (misusing) eminent domain to acquire preferred private property and effectively selling shares to unqualified outsiders to finance the deal. In the future will anyone's property be safe?

Citizens, particularly property owners, throughout California should be alarmed at the precedent. What other fiscally mismanaged counties will now cut deals with deep pockets partners on the guise of good deeds?

It appears our supervisors will have to, at least, vote to proceed with this deal. I am hoping for three no votes.

It appears state legislation will be required to accord the tribe qualification status to join the JPA. I am hoping the legislature and the governor reject such ill-founded and dangerous public policy.

I have an alternate idea for our supervisors. Many public stadiums have sold "naming rights" to private investors. Why not just drop the name Yolo County and rename this place Cache Creek Casino County?

- Jim Nielsen is a former state senator who writes for The Daily Democrat. Do you want to reply to his comments? Send your e-mail to ddletters@dailydemocrat.com