

Conaway cost slammed

By Elisabeth Sherwin/Enterprise staff writer

WOODLAND - Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting was marked by at-times angry exchanges about the mounting legal costs - creeping close to \$2 million - of acquiring the Conaway Ranch.

At issue was an item from the county counsel's office on the board's consent agenda. Items on the consent agenda are routinely approved by the board with little or no discussion.

This time, however, the item was taken off consent by the chair, Frank Siefertman Jr., to allow nine people to speak in opposition to the payment of up to \$687,000 from the county's General Fund to the Sacramento law firm of Somach, Simmons & Dunn. The money will be used chiefly to pay for the county's continuing effort to buy 16,300 acres of the Conaway Ranch by eminent domain.

As of Monday, the county had spent \$1.26 million on legal fees (primarily to the Somach law firm) and on professional fees to financial consultants, land appraisers and public relations firms.

With the addition of the \$687,000 approved on Tuesday, the county is coming very close to spending \$2 million on a lawsuit that will, at its conclusion, allow the county to spend a minimum of \$60 million to become the ranch's owner.

A valuation trial by jury has been set for June 13 by Yolo County Superior Judge Tim Fall, who ruled in November that the county had a right to buy the ranch from an unwilling seller, the Conaway Preservation Group. Attorney Stuart Somach represented the county at the court trial.

County Counsel Steve Basha told the board Tuesday that he would pursue settlement discussions. A pretrial settlement conference has been set for April 13.

Ernie Head of Davis and Dudley Holman of Woodland spoke to the board. Both men belong to the Yolo Taxpayers' Association.

"This is a mistake," said Holman, former Woodland mayor, regarding the purchase of the ranch.

"I'm trying to restrain my anger," he added, pointing out that the county has many immediate needs it cannot afford to address, while the purchase of the Conaway Ranch will put the county in debt.

"The debt can only be paid by selling the assets you profess to want to secure," he said.

"It just seems you don't know where to stop on this issue," added Blake Harlan of Woodland, who argued with Supervisor Mike McGowan over the definition of a farmer vs. a developer.

“Your arrogance as usual is overwhelming,” he said to the supervisor.

“I think you owe the public an economic analysis of the purchase and the return to the taxpayers,” said Stan Lester of Winters. “This is all being done behind closed doors - it's very scary.”

“The business plan is still in the works and we are not at liberty to discuss it,” said Sharon Jensen, chief administrative officer for the county.

Supervisor Chamberlain said he would not approve the additional expenditure.

“I'm against buying Conaway Ranch to begin with,” he said.

Chamberlain said he wanted the county to make a deal with the ranch owners without lawyers and judges getting involved in the negotiations.

“We need roads and levees,” he said. He said the county's money should be spent on lawyers to approve a deal after the negotiations take place.

McGowan listened to the public comment and then summarized the county's history with the ranch and blasted the current owners.

“Their intention is not to protect the ranch,” he said. “I believe this to the core of my being.”

The supervisor said if the county had not stepped in to buy the ranch, the same people who are criticizing him today would watch the land being sold and the water being shipped south and would say: “How could you let this happen?”

Supervisor Mariko Yamada of Davis also refused to be moved by critics of the purchase.

“I will stand my ground,” she said.

Sieferman agreed with Chamberlain on the need for a negotiated settlement.

“If we could remove the emotion, that's where we'll find a solution,” he said.

The board approved the expenditure of \$687,000 on a 4-1 vote with Chamberlain dissenting.

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