

Dispute clouding vision for ranch's future

By Elisabeth Sherwin/Enterprise staff writer

It was difficult for some people to accept the premise of Thursday evening's public visioning meeting for the future of Conaway Ranch.

"This is a meeting to discuss and compile the issues and desires that will arise under county ownership of Conaway Ranch," said Bob Schneider of Davis, a longtime environmental activist representing the Tuleyome organization.

"There is a lot of recreational potential there," he added. "It's a pretty great place."

But many of those attending the meeting disagreed with the threshold idea — that Yolo County is going to buy the 17,300-acre ranch by eminent domain — and had a difficult time looking 50 years into the future.

Tuleyome and the Sierra Club Yolano Group sponsored the meeting Thursday night at the Davis Public Library. Yolo County is embroiled in a controversial legal effort to acquire the ranch from private owners for what leaders say is the greater public good.

About 50 people, including farmers, Yolo County employees, environmentalists, a representative from the Conaway Preservation Group, and community members from Woodland and Davis attended the meeting. No Yolo County supervisors were present.

"Tonight is about a publicly owned resource — step past the controversy," urged facilitator Jeff Loux, former Davis planning director and now director of Land Use and Natural Resources at UC Davis Extension.

"This is a brainstorming, a visioning session," added Andrew Fulks, another facilitator and manager of the UC Davis Riparian Reserve. "We will take all comments, compile them, make them available online and present them to the Board of Supervisors.

"We will have several of these visioning sessions," he added.

Fulks said the exercise would put the county ahead of the curve before it takes ownership of the ranch.

"And if it doesn't happen we haven't wasted our time because we'll know what people in the county want," he added.

Those attending the meeting divided into three groups. Members of each group were given the

opportunity to say what they wanted to see on the land 50 years in the future.

“In 50 years there will be more people, less farmland and it will be more important to maintain (Conaway) in agriculture,” said Jeff Sutton of the Family Water Alliance.

Farmers generally said they wanted to see the property kept in rice and alfalfa crops.

“Can the county be trusted to keep water on the ranch for the next 50 years?” asked Blake Harlan.

“I want to see all surface water and ground water stay in the county,” Randy Milliken said.

Environmentalists spoke of the need to protect the existing open space and habitat. A suggestion was made to devote 15 percent of the land to willow grassland and keep 85 percent in farming.

Others suggested that no development and no asphalt or impervious surfaces ever be allowed to cover ranch property.

Another suggestion was made to combine the Woodland/Davis tertiary wastewater treatment programs in one wetlands area.

A third facilitator, John Munn, said a member of his group introduced a novel idea: Expand the western levee and increase the capacity of the bypass for flood control. Munn is a Yolo Republican leader and former Davis Board of Education member.

The Conaway Ranch consists of more than 17,000 acres inside and outside of the Yolo Bypass, between Interstate 80 on the south and Interstate 5 on the north. The ranch represents an integral part of a Davis-Woodland greenbelt with significant water rights, special habitat areas and an important agricultural economy.

It also offers unique recreational opportunities close to major urban areas, including the cities of Woodland, West Sacramento, Davis and Sacramento.

Other suggestions made at the meeting included the need to control public access and the need to create a financially viable long-term business plan. Some people said they didn't want the water to leave the ranch, others said they didn't want it to leave the county.

Many of the comments at the meeting revealed at least two conflicting points of view. How can adequate water remain on the ranch for farming and habitat? Can farming exist with habitat protection? Can habitat protection exist with hunting? What role should the current farmers play?

What are appropriate recreational opportunities such as mountain biking, hiking, horseback riding, bird

watching, hunting and fishing in the Tule Canal? How should recreation, habitat and farming be balanced and maximized?

Munn said many of the suggestions made his group were countered with the opposite point of view. Some wanted to see resources sold, others wanted resources preserved.

“We agreed that there needs to be a process for discussion and an opportunity for all to express their opinions,” he said.

Overall, the audience followed the ground rules and focused on a future vision for the land, not on the acquisition process.

In November, Judge Timothy Fall ruled that the county has the right to take the property from the private owners. The second half of the eminent domain trial is scheduled for June to determine the price the county should pay for the ranch.

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