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## Developer launches PR drive to hold onto Conaway Ranch

### Yolo officials want to seize the property by eminent domain.

**By Pamela Martineau -- Bee Staff Writer**

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The public relations battle over the water-rich Conaway Ranch has kicked into high gear.

Last week, a public relations firm hired by Sacramento developer Steve Gidaro hosted a town hall meeting in Woodland to tell farmers why Yolo County should not use eminent domain to seize Gidaro's recently acquired 17,300-acre ranch.

Saying Gidaro and his partners in the Conaway Preservation Group have no plans to develop the property but want to preserve it out of "passion" for the land, employees of the CPG urged attendees to contact Yolo County supervisors to oppose the eminent domain action.

"We'd appreciate your support," Tovey Giezentanner, a spokesman for CPG told a standing room only crowd of about 125 people at the Yolo County Farm Bureau.

"Overwhelmingly, folks think this is an inappropriate use of eminent domain," Giezentanner added, describing the results of a poll the CPG took of Yolo County residents in recent weeks.

Advocates have launched their own behind-the-scenes campaign in support of the seizure. They are circulating plans that Gidaro and his business partners concocted in the early 1990s to develop 4,000 acres of the property just east of Woodland for a housing and commercial development called Conaway Station.

"It demonstrates that Gidaro is being disingenuous when he says that his group has no plans for commercial development of this property," said Sacramento attorney Howard Dickstein.

Dickstein represents the Rumsey Band of Wintun Indians, who along with Yolo County, the University of California, Davis, the cities in Yolo and the Yolo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District are working to form a joint powers authority to purchase and manage the ranch.

Giezentanner responded by saying that it is no secret that Gidaro and others in the early 1990s investigated whether portions of the land could be developed. But development is not feasible for many reasons, he said, not the least of which is that the land is not designated for development under Woodland's and Yolo County's general plans and it lies in a floodplain.

The Yolo County-led effort to take the ranch by eminent domain is approaching two critical junctures. A bill by Assemblywoman Lois Wolk, D-Davis, to allow the Rumsey Indians to join the joint powers authority will be heard today in the Senate Local Government Committee. Some view AB 1747 as critical because the tribe would help finance the purchase of the ranch, which CPG acquired for an estimated \$60 million last year.

And on Aug. 23, a Yolo County judge will rule on whether the county can seize the land through eminent domain.

Yolo County and other public officials who are working to acquire the ranch say they are doing so to preserve its rich environmental resources for the people of the Sacramento region. The ranch - portions of which lie in the Yolo Bypass - is home to critical waterfowl habitat and holds rights to 50,000 acre-feet of water per year. It also contains thousands of acres of farmland that is leased to area growers.

"What this really boils down to is a contest or a choice between the land speculators buying the ranch and having our future in Yolo County being dictated by the profit motive ... or having a comprehensive management plan constructed by a variety of public entities for the use and benefit of citizens," said Yolo County Supervisor Mike McGowan.

CPG lobbyists are fighting the Wolk bill. Although it does not address eminent domain seizure, members of CPG say they oppose it as part of the county strategy to acquire the property.

Gidaro and partners with CPG acquired the ranch last fall from National Gas and Energy Transmission, a successor to PG&E Properties, which had owned the land since the early 1990s. Gidaro, an avid duck hunter, said he hopes to preserve the land for recreational and agricultural uses. CPG spokesmen also say they will sell development and conservation easements to area developers who will use the easements as environmental mitigation for their projects.

George Phillips, an attorney for CPG, told the crowd at the Farm Bureau gathering last week that the partnership can turn a profit on the property without developing it. Phillips also said the partnership had no plans to sell the land's water out of county.

"A number of (the partners) have made their living developing land," CPG attorney George Phillips told the crowd. "But this is not what drives (their) acquisition of this property. ... They are committed to the conservation of this land."

A few people at the meeting scoffed at that notion.

"I think a lot of this is a bunch of hooey," said local farmer Dozier Bei, who said the buyers wouldn't pay \$60 million for the land without a plan to develop some of it. "I'm sure they have it in the back of their mind."

But about 95 percent of those at the Farm Bureau meeting raised their hands when asked how many oppose the county's taking of the land by eminent domain.

"For a government agency to come in and take it over, I totally oppose that," said Anna DelCastillo, whose family has farmed in Yolo County since the 1870s. "I don't want you to develop that land, but if that's what you want to do in 20 years, ... it's your blood sweat and tears."

Giezentanner said more public meetings on the ranch are planned in Yolo County in coming months.

"We're hopeful that as people become more aware of this issue more pressure will be placed on local officials to suspend their action and give the private owners an opportunity to continue their stewardship and preservation of the land," he said.

But McGowan said it is unlikely that supervisors will back down.

"The long-term appropriate stewardship of this property and all its resources should be here with the public and not a group of developers and land speculators," said McGowan.

"It's ludicrous to me that people would say - 'Oh, I think they can do a better job.' That's just silly," he added.

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