

Yolo County board to hear public, vote again on Conaway Ranch water deal

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Yolo County supervisors, responding to public pressure, plan to redo this week a controversial vote over a deal with developer Angelo K. Tsakopoulos that smoothed the way for his purchase of the 17,300-acre Conaway Ranch.

In December, the board voted 3-2 to allow Tsakopoulos to sell 80,000 acre-feet of Conaway water to the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California and to grant the state of California an easement to turn 4,000 acres of the ranch into wetland habitat.

The cities of Davis and Woodland subsequently approved deals with Tsakopoulos to buy Conaway rights to Sacramento River water, and Tsakopoulos finalized his purchase of the ranch in late December.

In the meantime, Supervisor Jim Provenza of Davis and a Yolo County citizens group formally questioned whether the supervisors' vote in December was valid under the state's open-meeting law, known as the Brown Act.

The vote took place less than a day after the agreement was made public, and notice of the meeting failed to describe adequately what it was really about, they claimed.

Critics said the vote was too hasty and had not given residents sufficient time to review the agreement and respond.

County lawyers and the supervisors who voted for the deal with Tsakopoulos insisted the board had met all legal requirements.

On Jan. 28, the supervisors announced they had scheduled a special meeting to reconsider the matter.

In a written statement, county spokeswoman Beth Gabor said the meeting was "not to correct a legal problem, but to address a public perception that the Board of Supervisors acted too quickly in approving the agreement on December 17."

Board Chairman Matt Rexroad said in an interview that he still feels the December vote was legal. The meeting and new vote Tuesday are just to make sure it is "absolutely rock solid," he said.

"I'm very comfortable with my vote on this, and I think we're fine procedurally," he said.

Rexroad said the proposed agreement to be voted on Tuesday is nearly identical to the one approved in December.

He expects the 3-2 vote to be the same, even though Supervisor Helen Thomson retired at the end of the year and has been replaced by Don Saylor of Davis.

"Could something crazy happen?" Rexroad asked. "Yes, there's always a risk."

Provenza, who voted against the Conaway deal with Supervisor Duane Chamberlain, said he is pleased that the board will reconsider the matter.

He said he is expecting members of groups such as the Yolo County Farm Bureau and the Yolo Basin Foundation – who didn't have sufficient notice to attend December's vote – to address the supervisors Tuesday. State lawmakers, including state Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Davis, have indicated they also might attend, he said.

"I think we're doing the right thing to hear it again," Provenza said. "Regardless of where you come down on the Brown Act issue, there are still people who didn't have adequate notice. Now everyone will have a chance to have a say."