

Inside Politics: Battle royale over call center jobs comes to light

By Lisa Vorderbrueggen *Contra Costa Times* *Contra Costa Times*

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Each side says the other is exerting undue political influence and mischaracterizing the costs and benefits of the two buildings under consideration.

The whole writhing mess will land on the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors' lap Tuesday, when they are expected to choose a site.

Concord undeniably has more political juice.

The influential Garaventa family has considerable real estate holdings, including three call centers. It also owns the Concord site, a former Comcast call center in the city's industrial park east of Highway 4 near Port Chicago.

They also own Concord Disposal, which has a contract with the city for garbage service.

While calling the longtime Central Contra Costa family "kingmakers" is overly dramatic, would-be candidates seek their support. The Garaventas are -- and have been for years -- among the most reliable campaign contributors in the county.

In the past three years, the Garaventas have contributed to four of the five county supervisors' campaigns -- Federal Glover, of Pittsburg, \$8,000; Mary Nejedly Piepho, of Discovery Bay, \$5,535; John Gioia, of Richmond, \$5,025; and Karen Mitchoff, of Pleasant Hill, \$2,000. (The Garaventas supported Supervisor Candace Andersen's opponent.)

Richard Poe, who owns the other building under consideration at 1450 Marina Way in Richmond, is a much smaller fish. Poe's father developed most of Marina Bay, a lovely residential waterside development with a marina and restaurants.

The Richmond businessman also has ties to Gioia, who lives in Marina Bay and did some legal work for Poe in the 1990s. Poe has contributed \$4,975 to Gioia's campaigns in the past three years.

Measuring political influence is like trying to bottle fog, but for their parts, Gioia and Mitchoff say they will base their votes not on politics but on the cheapest deal in the best location.

He says that's Richmond. She says it's Concord.

Go figure. Who is right? It depends on how you define "best."

Richmond has a higher unemployment rate but not by much. Both communities need jobs.

Concord is more centrally located but if this was the rule, every county office would be in Concord.

The three-year cost to lease and occupy the Richmond building is lower than the Concord office, according to the staff's analysis.

That conclusion, however, hinges on a \$1 million taxpayers loan the city of Richmond says it will give Poe to buy furniture for the call center.

The Concord building already has 400 perfectly usable, albeit 10-year-old, double-person pod-style desks.

But county staff say the state wants new single-person, ergonomically designed desks. The specs also mandate using desks that allow workers' screens to be mounted in such a way that they cannot be read by others in order to protect patient data.

Keep in mind, this is a three-year lease with a 30-day cancellation clause. The state doesn't know if it will keep all three new call centers open after the Affordable Care Act startup period ends.

And since the call center is secure and all its employees must sign nondisclosure statements, the extra privacy may be overkill.

Does the state really need to spend \$1 million of taxpayers' money on new furniture?

The California Health Benefit Exchange's decision to contract with Contra Costa -- rather than run the center with state employees -- is already driving up operating costs by 13 percent, due to the county's higher wages and benefits.

"I would rather spend that \$1 million on something else," Mitchoff said.

Antacids, perhaps?

- Kudos to the Oakland City Council, which mandated electronic campaign finance reporting for all candidates.
- New math? Fifty-three percent of voters oppose lowering the 66.66 percent voter threshold for new taxes, per a new study.
- If you hanker to investigate, Contra Costa County is looking for civil grand jury applicants.

and finally: At least the call center jobs are staying in California, thanks to Assemblywoman Susan Bonilla, D-Concord. She successfully pushed a bill last year that mandated the call centers stay in the state.

Pass the antacids, please.

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