

# Fresno County supervisors criticize Selma-area land deal

By Marc Benjamin

District 4 supervisor Buddy Mendes talks about land in Selma he said was overpriced when it was bought 8 years ago. THEFRESNOBEE

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SELMA — • *Fresno County wants to sell a piece of Selma farmland for \$4.6 million.*

• *A 2014 appraisal shows the land is only worth about \$1.5 million.*

• *Some county supervisors can't believe the county bought the land in the first place.*



Eight years ago, Fresno County supervisors were acting like land barons when they bought 90 acres near Selma for a proposed agriculture center. Now, all they have left is barren land.

Officials had planned to use the site near Selma as a campus setting for agricultural offices, such as the Agricultural Commissioner's Office, other county, state and federal offices, as well as commodity groups and farming-related agencies.

The county paid more than \$4.6 million, using tobacco tax settlement funds, for the highway-adjacent agricultural property — more than \$50,000 per acre. But a 2014 appraisal shows that the land is only worth about \$17,000 per acre, or about \$1.5 million.

Supervisors voted this month to sell the property, but the starting price will be \$4.6 million, which leaves a large gap to bridge, they concede.

"I am totally embarrassed that the county did that," said newly elected Supervisor Buddy Mendes, referring to the 2007 purchase during the supervisors' meeting on April 7.

Supervisor Andreas Borgeas said the land purchase was "outrageous ... what kind of Kool-Aid was being drunk at the time?"

Supervisor Brian Pacheco chimed in that if the county can't get at least \$4.6 million for the property, then it shouldn't be sold. He said he is confident that someday the land may be worth that price.

"Don't take one dime lower than \$4.6 million," he said.

County supervisors have been discussing selling that site and other surplus property, including land at the old Fresno juvenile hall and the old Elkhorn jail facility.

When the county bought the land, there was talk of building a highway overpass to Selma from the east side of the freeway. If that occurred, the land could have been designated for light industrial or other higher-price highway-side uses. An overpass would have allowed for a less circuitous route to the site on Huntsman and DeWolf avenues.

In a 2007 staff report authored by Bart Bohn, then the county administrative officer, the land would hold the future center for Agriculture and Food Safety, which was going to "provide essential coordination and support for the county's

agriculture industry helping to ensure that it remains strong and vital for future generations.”

In October 2006, the project had been identified as a priority. The county had a site selection subcommittee and 14 locations were considered. Ultimately, the group supported the Selma-area site.

Officials wanted to provide a center where farming groups could easily collaborate with each other, and to include private- and public-sector involvement.

When the plan was hatched in 2006, the idea of a large agricultural research center linked with Fresno State seemed possible, said Henry R. Perea, the only supervisor remaining from that era.

“The dream was for a regional ag center,” he said. “Then, the economy started tanking.”

The land now sits vacant in brown ankle-high grass. As farmland, it remains fallow because it can’t be leased for private farming. Because the county used tobacco tax settlement monies to buy the land, it can only have a public use. So it will continue to sit idle unless the property is sold or some other arrangement is made.

Mendes, a farmer whose district includes Selma, said he could see the land being productive almond property under a long-term lease. Such a lease could generate about \$500,000 over 20 years, he estimates.

Board Chairwoman Debbie Poochigian proposed a backup plan if the county can’t get its price. She said the county could swap its own funds for tobacco monies, which would let the county lease the land for farming. Her idea will have to be reviewed by county lawyers to ensure that it’s viable.

Perea said he likes Poochigian’s idea, because it would free up tobacco funds to pay for new county facilities. At the top of the priority list is a new district attorney’s office.

He said the county still could get its \$4.6 million asking price.

“That’s prime land, that’s good land,” Perea said. “I think the price is reasonable because ag property is at a premium right now.”

But for now, county officials said, getting the minimum bid seems like a tall order.

“Whoever approved this should get a nasty note from us,” Poochigian said.

Added Mendes: “And a good swift kick you know where.”

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