

Fresno County supervisors delay Elkhorn boot camp sale

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The Fresno County Board of Supervisors may be one step closer to selling its former Elkhorn boot camp site.

Or maybe not.

A board discussion on Tuesday was the third time in about a year that supervisors considered selling the Elkhorn land. And, a fourth time is coming soon.

Board members said Tuesday that they could consider keeping a piece of the property and selling the rest.

Elkhorn is considered surplus property by the county because its previous purpose as a juvenile boot camp is outdated. Supervisors offered various directions about keeping a chunk of land along Highway 41 for a recharge basin and as highway-side property.

Last year, the board chose not to sell the property, which required a four-fifths vote. Supervisors voted 3-2 on two occasions to put the boot camp up for sale; four votes were required to sell it.

But the board has two new members, and it seems like they're leaning toward selling, but with reservations.

Supervisor Buddy Mendes, who wasn't on the board last year, suggested that supervisors consider saving part of the 317 acres – about 40 – for a recharge basin.

"It has great potential for groundwater recharge," Mendes said.

He said water from the Kings River can be stored in the recharge basin during flood years by using the nearby Liberty Canal to move the water. The property along Highway 41, in addition to the recharge basin, totals about 100 acres, he estimated.

\$409,325

The amount spent to maintain Elkhorn boot camp in the past four years

Supervisor Brian Pacheco, who also joined the board in January, said he wants a thorough evaluation before agreeing to sell it. He would be open to keeping at least the western portion of the property and possibly more.

"It needs to be looked at in its entirety," he said.

Supervisors asked for a staff review to figure out how much of Elkhorn's 317 acres should be used for a recharge basin, how much should be sold and how much should be kept for the future.

Supervisor Andreas Borgeas said "market forces" today favor a price of up to \$25,000 to \$30,000 per acre, which could return as much as \$9 million.

In the 1950s, the property opened as an honor farm to provide food items for the jail. The honor farm closed in 1994, but Elkhorn reopened as a youth boot camp in 1997 before closing in 2009 because of budget cuts. The buildings have remained vacant since.

Borgeas said it makes little sense to keep Elkhorn, which has cost \$409,325 to maintain because of theft and vandalism in the past four years. He said the land has lost its intended purpose, because any similar future use would

take place at the county's Juvenile Justice Center near Malaga.

"We purchased it at a low value and now it's at a high value, and we can be using that money to put toward a District Attorney's building or, more importantly, in reserves," Borgeas said.

Supervisor Debbie Poochigian favors a long-term lease for farming, but said she would consider selling a piece and keeping a portion of the land along Highway 41.

About 245 acres of farm land were leased at a price of \$51,940 per year. That lease expired last year as the county prepared to sell the land.

In other action, the supervisors voted to approve a \$22,500 settlement with the American Civil Liberties Union on a dietary policy lawsuit that prohibited three jail inmates from getting kosher meals. The vote was 4-1 with Poochigian suggesting the lawsuit is similar to the "shakedown lawsuits" filed against businesses for violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act. County Counsel Dan Cederborg recommended the settlement because the cost to fight it would exceed the cost of the settlement.

Without discussion, supervisors approved repairs to the Fresno County Hall of Records, which was damaged after a sprinkler was struck and flooded the building on July 27. Officials estimate the repairs will cost \$1.5 million. Insurance is expected to pay all but about \$25,000 of the repairs.

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