



Contra Costa Times editorial: Delaying planned summit is not enough

Contra Costa Times editorial
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A majority of directors of the Bay Area Air Quality Management District on Wednesday put the brakes on an unethical plan to use public money and funds from firms the agency regulates to host an invitation-only event featuring former President Bill Clinton.

Unfortunately, the directors did not kill the idea. Rather they only postponed the Oct. 21 event in Richmond until the spring.

We remain uncertain how they intend to resolve the ethical problems underlying this ego-gratification scheme. Indeed, the fundamental problems have worsened as staff deceptions about the event's cost come to light.

Executive Director Jack Broadbent, while apologizing to his directors for keeping them in the dark about the details, continued to hide the true price tag of the event. His staff has stated publicly that the summit on environmental effects of infill development would cost \$250,000, including a ridiculous \$150,000 for Clinton's speaking fee. But they admitted to us after the meeting that the total bill is expected to be close to \$400,000.

And while staff members were saying publicly they intended to find funding for Clinton's fee from firms not regulated by the agency, the numbers they presented Wednesday showed that they had lined up only a small fraction of what's needed.

Moreover, the private contributors included Pacific Gas and Electric, which the air board regulates, and national business and environmental law firm Farella

Braun and Martel.

Billed as the "Blueprint for Healthv Communities

Summit," the conference is supposed to help local officials understand the health considerations of infill development. For example, we don't want to build schools and homes next to refineries or freeways.

The goal is laudable, but the execution has been horrible.

While industry representatives were being solicited for contributions in exchange for tickets to the event, members of the community groups in Richmond, Oakland, San Francisco and parts of San Jose most affected by living next to pollution sources had not been consulted.

If directors want to move forward with this event in the spring, they need to ensure that it's free of funding from regulated industries or their representatives. And they need to ensure that only minimal public money is used.

District officials have tried to justify paying Clinton's exorbitant speaking fee by claiming he will draw an audience of public officials who need to hear about healthy communities. If that's what it takes to draw elected officials, chances are they weren't serious about the issue to begin with.

But even if one accepts that hiring Clinton is a good idea and that his bill will be covered from outside sources, that still leaves the issue of spending \$250,000 of public money for the rest of the event for about 500 invited guests. Spending public money at a rate of \$500 per person for a one-day conference is absurd.

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It's not at all clear to us that the directors understand the problems. Some seemed more concerned about the bad publicity and the poor organization of the event. Some, like Alameda County Supervisors Nate Miley and Scott Haggerty and San Ramon City Councilman Dave Hudson, were ready to move forward next month.

This summit should be put on hold until the directors and their staff get a grip on proper expenditures of public funds and fundamental ethics. Delaying the event until the spring will not solve that.

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