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## Tension palpable at meeting Racism, embezzlement discussed at community center bid award

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Some council members charged racism while others said they had a lack of confidence in the city's ability to manage its finances as debate about Los Baños' community center project reached a crescendo Wednesday night.

The bid to build the center was awarded to Gilroy-based Kent Construction for \$9.2 million by way of a 3-2 vote. It was not without controversy.

"I've heard total disrespect for council members here. I will say this, ignorance is an excuse...stupidity is not," Councilman Joe Sousa said, adding that some people oppose the community center because "The guy who sits in the middle will undoubtedly get credit for this project."

Mayor Tommy Jones, an African American who has the middle seat at the council's dais, picked up where Sousa left off.

"They didn't want this thing built because there was too much pigmentation in my skin," Jones said. "This is 2009 and that still exists."

Both men appeared to be directing their comments toward some private citizens who are critics of the center project, not necessarily other council members.

Councilmen Mike Villalta and Tom Faria argued that the bid for the community center should be delayed until a police investigation of a former employee is complete. The ex-employee is alleged to have embezzled more than \$400,000.

"I have another concern, and that concern is that we're not ready to manage a project," Villalta said. "I don't trust the city's finances."

Faria said discussions on city finances are valid.

"There has been a major embezzlement. So we're going to build a building, a facility, a magnificent facility, but it's going to have to have some cash being handled. We have already proven we don't handle cash very well," Faria said. "We have an embezzlement case under way. We don't know the details. Was anyone else embezzling? Are we going to hand the operations of the project over to somebody who's still embezzling?"

Los Baños residents, like council members, found themselves split on whether the city should proceed with the \$12.5 million project.

Local resident George Alan indicated that the city operating a community center equates to taking away a business opportunity from the private sector.

Community Center Task Force member Shirley Napolitano disagreed.

"The fact that we have a garbage dump that is run by the city does not mean we're in the garbage business," Napolitano said, illustrating her point by using an analogy.

Many residents packaged the community center debate and the embezzlement allegations together, using the opportunity to call for City Manager Steve Rath's resignation or dismissal.

Redevelopment Agency Director Elaine Post produced a marketing strategy for the center that included its revised cost for staffing, operation and maintenance costs. Post said two part-time workers will be utilized at the facility for a combined \$49,675 annually. Operating and maintaining the facility is estimated to cost \$157,700.

The estimated revenue for the facility is \$203,620, leaving the city short \$3,755 of the center paying for itself. Post said aggressive marketing could result in additional use of the center and cover the deficit. If she is wrong the more than \$3,700 will likely come from the city's general fund.

The marketing plan projects that the community center's grand room will be booked 36 times per year, generating \$72,000 in revenue. Admission passes to the community center will be sold at a cost of \$15 per month and \$2 daily. The city anticipates receiving \$31,500 annually from the passes.

City-sponsored events are estimated to generate \$30,000, 24 bookings per year of the facility's multi-purpose room are anticipated to create \$22,800, meetings and classes held at the center \$30,720 and users paying for cleanup after an event is estimated at \$20,200.

The city's community center will include a multi-purpose gymnasium with bleachers and a middle school-sized basketball court, a barbecue patio, drop off/pick up area for food fund-raisers, a grand room with a stage, dinner seating for 470 people, a kitchen, mechanical and storage related spaces, a game room, quiet room, senior lounge, arts and crafts room, fitness studio and administrative offices.

Public Works Director Mark Fachin said construction of the center will begin in mid to late June.