

Saving Trees in Old Courthouse Square

If you feel that there is some “crazy logic” at work to destroy the trees for side streets and parking on a reunified Square, you are not imagining it. You can hear that removing the trees is very unpopular among people you speak with, so you wonder why this idea is moving along at all. But make no mistake; it is moving along quickly with chainsaws ready to start removing Redwood and Cedar trees in a few days.

Unfortunately, the pursuit of short term profits now is pushing this along. It’s a power play. The City Council will not respect peoples’ opinions about the trees because they need to deliver this \$10 - \$30 million dollar project to their campaign donors and other special interests. They can’t wait, because they need to deliver this win during this election cycle. From the beginning, they knew they would need to compromise, so they showed us a plan that removes all the trees. Then they put a few trees back in to make us feel successful. But the entire process is flawed because who wants a mediocre town square – perhaps it’s best to do nothing at this time and wait for a better plan.

We need to hold our City Council accountable. Ask them whether the donations they accepted from a few businesses, attorneys, the Chamber of Commerce, and several powerful political action committees creates a conflict of interest that makes them ineligible to vote on the reunification project. Below is a chart of donors that may have caused a conflict of interest having donated during the last election cycle. These donors may make a promise to donate in the future, too.

Public Portal for Campaign Finance Disclosure: <http://ci.santa-rosa.ca.us/departments/cityadmin/cityclerk/voterinfo/Pages/default.aspx>

| Accepted \$250 or more from: | Honorable Councilperson Term Expires: | Erin Carlstrom 2016 | Julie Combs 2016 | Chris Coursey 2018 | Ernesto Olivares 2016 | John Sawyer 2018 | Tom Schwedhelm 2018 | Gary Wysocky 2016 |
|-------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Carlisle Macy | Project Managers | * | * | * | YES | * | * | * |
| Coombs, Richard et al | Family owns building on the Square. | * | * | * | YES | * | * | YES |
| Futrell, Hugh | Owns building on SW corner of the Square | * | * | YES | YES | * | * | YES |
| Gratton, Patrick | Owns Empire Building | * | * | YES | * | * | * | * |
| North Bay Leadership Council PAC | Invitation only group of banks, developers, with members on the Square | * | * | * | YES | YES | YES | * |
| Rendevous Bistro et al | Restaurant on NE corner. | YES | * | * | YES | * | * | * |
| Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce | Moving to a subsidized office on the Square. | YES | * | * | YES | YES | YES | * |
| Sonoma County Alliance PAC | Business group of developers, bankers, attorneys with members on the Square. | * | * | * | YES | YES | YES | * |
| Wasem, Larry | Family owns building on the Square. | * | * | * | YES | YES | YES | YES |

Subject to verification with FPCC. (*) denotes no data found.

This is a small sample of the potential conflicts-of-interest. Dozens, perhaps over a hundred potential conflicts-of-interest can be found within the reporting documents (Forms 410, 460, 497 and 501) that all candidates must file. Every Councilmember except for Julie Combs has at least two potential conflicts, in our opinion.

Many businesses are against the planned reunification and the removal of trees. Although there have been calls to boycott downtown businesses if **any trees** are removed from the square, please consider that the small businesses that would be hurt (restaurants, galleries, personal service, retailers and so on) have had no role in deciding what happens with the Square. By virtue of being located in Santa Rosa they must already cope with lots of government interference including Business Improvement Area (BIA) assessments, additional taxes, parking costs and more.

Perhaps what is most embarrassing is the notion that the Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce represents Santa Rosa's businesses. The Chamber has maybe 400 dues paying business members **within the City limits**, yet there are over 16,000 businesses in the City according to the US Census Bureau, so **the Chamber represents about 2.5% of Santa Rosa's businesses.** The businesses that are dues paying Chamber members most likely are commercial banks, attorneys, business services, and wineries located outside the City's boundaries. Membership in the Chamber also means endorsing the local and national Chambers' right-of-center politics.

Hotels and restaurants are also members. We estimate (with the help of County statistics) that 90% of hotels, 1% of BnBs, and 2% of restaurants in the City limits are Chamber members. In 2010, an ordinance was passed that adds a 3% BIA tax that is collected from guests staying at Hotels, Motels, and BnBs (in addition to the 9% tax collected on behalf of the County). The revenue from the 3% produces **several millions of dollars a year** in the City. About 68% of what is collected is sent directly to the Chamber of Commerce because they have a contract to manage the Santa Rosa Convention and Visitors Bureau (SRCVB). But instead of promoting all Santa Rosa businesses, SRCVB only promotes Chamber members. If you open a restaurant in downtown Santa Rosa, you will need to pay the Chamber \$800 or more just to be promoted, although BIA money was already collected to promote all Santa Rosa businesses. The County has incredible resources for tourism related businesses free-of-charge, but the SRCVB blocks most of that information from their website. It's all about controlling this money instead of delivering services to Santa Rosa's businesses and guests.

According to the Chamber's 2013 tax return, more money comes from the City than from dues-paying members, making them look and act like another government agency, one that is out of control of taxpayer oversight.

Finally please realize that **the Chamber is also a 365 day a year political action committee.** They financially support some candidates and initiatives over others, and use their membership for political outreach. (See chart on other side.) Our tax money goes into that machine, for the Chamber to use to promote political candidates of their choice.

What does this mean for our trees?

According to the Press Democrat in an article from November 23, 2015, "Carlile-Macy was the nearly unanimous pick of a seven member selection panel that met behind closed doors last week to review the three proposals, which were kept secret except for the names of the firms competing for the work. " And continued, " The review panel had seven voting members: Gary Wysocky, Santa Rosa City councilman; Jonathan Coe, president of the Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce; Ralf Konietzko, an architect representing the American Institute for Architecture; Hugh Futrell, a downtown developer and representative of Coalition to Restore Courthouse Square; Nanette Smejkal, director of Recreation & Parks Department; Danielle O'Leary, the city's Economic Development manager; and (Jason) Nutt, the director of Transportation & Public Works. (The City employees, now given this extraordinary power already earn over \$200,000.) (<http://www.pressdemocrat.com/news/4810532-181/design-team-picked-for-santa?ref=related&gallery=4726369&artslide=0>)

It is unusual to have just a few people, all connected by tremendous conflict of interest, decide in secrecy to spend \$500,000 - \$800,000 of the public's money and pave the way to spend \$10 - \$30 million more. It's unknown at this time how much the Chamber has made already from the Old Courthouse Square Reunification plan.

Nobody is looking out for what the people want. It's really all about the money, and the trees may be sacrificed.

City Council Chambers, 1/26, from 4 pm on (hearing on Courthouse Square will be after 6 pm) to show **OUTRAGE.**