

Coastal Voices: RHS board must answer for its actions; Fornoff's column rings false

By Terry McNamara

The recent column by Triplicate Editor Robin Fornoff, accusing the Del Norte Healthcare District of “taking fresh food from the mouths of poor people,” is false and defamatory.

For those unfamiliar with the story, here is the background:

Earlier this year, the State of California filed a lawsuit against the Rural Human Services (RHS) Board of Directors and its Executive Director Scott Feller. The state filed suit on behalf of an RHS employee who reported multiple instances of sexual harassment and workplace retaliation by Feller.

The RHS board was sued for failing to take appropriate action to protect its employee. RHS hired its own investigator, who reportedly substantiated the employee's claims. The RHS board ultimately settled the lawsuit for \$152,500, plus terms and conditions aimed at preventing ongoing harassment at RHS. Thereafter, another woman employed at RHS publicly attested that she also experienced sexual harassment by Feller.

Last month, the Del Norte Healthcare District received a funding request from RHS for a local food program (Market Match) administered by RHS. During our public meeting, current and former RHS employees reported additional misconduct by RHS leadership. In addition, I received a report that Feller had received a severance package. If so, the severance could be an illegal diversion of charitable funds.

The Del Norte Healthcare District tabled RHS' request until our concerns with the RHS board were addressed, including whether the RHS board was properly administering public funds. In addition to money spent on hiring a private investigator and costs associated with settling its lawsuit, RHS is expected to face higher premiums to insure its board from future lawsuits, now that the RHS board has settled one lawsuit against itself.

The overwhelming public consensus during our recent healthcare district meeting was that to restore trust in RHS, the RHS board must resign. Meanwhile, Feller and the RHS board admit no wrongdoing.

Importantly, during our recorded public meeting, the RHS employee in charge of Market Match stated that the Market Match food program could be funded this year using vendor fees instead of public monies. In other words, RHS reported there would be no interruption in the Market Match program, whether or not the healthcare district funded the program.

Enter Fornoff. In bold headlines, he accuses the Healthcare District of "Taking food from mouths of poor . . ." Wrong. See paragraph above. If Fornoff had only bothered to listen to the meeting record taken by his own reporter, he would have known better.

Back to the RHS board. They have not responded to the healthcare district's written inquiry as to whether Feller received a severance package. Our letter to RHS is available at www.delnortehealthcare.org.

The failure of RHS to provide information is reminiscent of the refusal from Sutter Coast Hospital to honor multiple public record requests by city and county leaders (see Joint Resolution on Healthcare at www.delnortehealthcare.org.)

We know that both tax exempt public charities — RHS and Sutter Coast Hospital — have a common board member, hospital CEO Mitch Hanna. Hanna has refused to honor record requests from elected leaders or to post charges for care at Sutter Coast Hospital. Hanna also oversaw the promotion of Feller to chairman of the Sutter Coast Hospital Board of Directors, during the time Feller's conduct at RHS was under review.

The stonewalling and closed board meetings at RHS and Sutter Coast Hospital need to end. RHS and Sutter Coast Hospital operate off the tax rolls and receive taxpayer dollars. Why is their secrecy allowed?

I don't know what motivated Fornoff's false claims against the healthcare district but I can assure readers the healthcare district will continue the following:

Exercise due diligence with public funds.

Support employees and goals of RHS.

Invite ongoing dialogue with the public via our website, open public meetings, and direct communication with me and my fellow Directors Kevin Caldwell, Dwayne Reichlin, Shellie Babich, and Greg Duncan.

Terry McNamara is chairman of the Del Norte Healthcare District.