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# Airport lease held hostage?

Butch Hambleton says top L.A. official laid out unpleasant bottom line for Inyo County recently

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Deliver more water from Inyo County to Los Angeles and get a new lease on L.A.'s land that is home to the Eastern Sierra Regional Airport in

Bishop. That, according to one county official, is the "bottom line" stance by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power concerning the multi-year effort by the county to extend its current lease at the airport to 20 years.

Since the county was unable to accomplish that goal, it has lost \$1.5 million in federal grants that could have been used for airport improvements at the Bishop and Lone Pine airports.

That simple solution to the county's lease problem at the Bishop airport - "more water, new lease" - was

reportedly offered by the man who can make it happen, Dominick Rubalcava, LADWP board president.

Rubalcava's frank response to the county's effort to get the lease extension was recently conveyed to Fourth District Supervisor Butch Hambleton. (Rubalcava could not be reached for comment at press time.)

Hambleton said "it was a real eye-opener" to hear Rubalcava reveal LADWP's true motives for delaying the lease negotiations for years, and did not dispute the observation the "water for lease" offer by Rubalcava verged on simple blackmail.

After Rubalcava made the "c during a phone conversation Hambleton said he told the LADWP board head that the full county Board of Supervisors would have to be informed of Rubalcava's position.

Hambleton relayed the results of his informal talk with Rubalcava to the board on Tuesday, and reported that his fellow board members were "shocked" by Rubalcava's comments. The airport lease issue was on the agenda for the board's meeting, on Sept. 21.

Several years ago, the county... See LEASE, page

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## LEASE

Continued from front page awarded about \$1.5 million in Federal Aviation Administration grants for improvements to the Bishop and Lone Pine airports, but since the federal agency requires at least a 20-year lease on the land slated to get the improvements, those grants have since been revoked, said county Public Works Director Jeff Jewett.

The county did do some projects, such as install a new water line on an easement - not LADWP lease-land - using FAA funds, he said.

The current lease has 16 years left to run, Hambleton said, and all the county was trying to do, when it was clear the grant money was in danger, was obtain a four-year extension so it could use the FAA grants.

"This is not a complicated bit of business," said Hambleton, but for at least two years, the local LADWP office "has been stonewalling us" about extending the lease.

The Bishop airport was slated for a \$1 million grant to help rebuild the runways and make other improvements, and \$573,000 of FAA money was earmarked for improvements at the Lone Pine airport. Now, because of the 20-year lease requirement, the FAA has taken back both

grants, Jewett said. Hambleton said he recently tried to make an end-run around the local LADWP office and appeal directly to the mayor of Los Angeles for help with the county airports.

Besides needing the minimum 20-year lease for any future FAA funds, the condition of portions of some runways at the Bishop airport is deteriorating. The Caltrans Aeronautics Division recently completed its yearly inspection of the Bishop airport runways and found cracks in the runways and taxi area that need to be fixed, Jewett said.

Caltrans can not only order the county to "fix" the runways, it "can close down" the airport if it feels the runways are not safe, said Hambleton, although such a move doesn't seem to be imminent. Jewett concurred. "That was a wake-up call," Jewett said, adding he would like to fix the cracks, but doesn't have the funds to do so.

So, Hambleton said he decided to call Los Angeles Mayor James Hahn's office and see if the mayor could somehow get involved, "since obviously we were not getting anything from DWP."

The L.A. deputy mayor for Aviation ("I didn't even know they had such a thing") responded

music the singers sang, Reagan

and said he knew about FAA grant requirements and the situation in Bishop, Hambleton said. The deputy said he could probably help and promised to "put a little muscle on this."

Apparently, he overestimated his strength.

The next call Hambleton got was from another deputy mayor, this one stationed in Hahn's office, who declared he was the man to talk to about any Los Angeles issues in the Owens Valley. So, Hambleton said, he explained the county's concerns to that deputy mayor.

Finally, the call came in from Rubalcava, "the guy who really controls this," noted Hambleton. Not only is Rubalcava the LADWP board president, he is also one of Hahn's closest advisors and a major fundraiser.

Rubalcava was well aware of the lease negotiations, said Hambleton, and said the "bottom line was more water, new lease."

(Ironic Aside: Rubalcava knows all about the potential economic benefits of expanding and improving the Bishop airport. Or at least that's the impression he gave earlier this year before touring the Owens Valley with Hahn to gather input on the idea of placing some sort of conservation easement on LADWP land, a move Rubalcava openly opposed. Rubalcava, at the time, pointed specifically to proposed development around the Bishop airport as an example of why some land in the valley should remain open to development and as a reason to go slowly on any easement proposal for LADWP land.)