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Fair board hires lawyer after state attorney drops case

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COSTA MESA The OC Fair Board has hired legal representation after being told by the state Attorney General's office late last year to find alternative legal counsel to avoid conflicts of interest involving the sale of the fairgrounds.

Law firm Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, LLP, and [Steve Edwards](#), a partner in the firm's Orange County office, is overseeing and advising the OC Fair & Event Center's legal affairs including contracts and human resource matters for a year.

CEO Steve Beazley said Thursday that fairgrounds management interviewed four firms before making a decision.

The state Attorney General's Office, which represents all state agencies and departments, declined to represent the 32nd Agricultural Association District Board until issues regarding the sale of the 150-acre site are resolved. It will, however, however, pay the fair board to find its own legal counsel, officials said.

"Given the seemingly intertwined and potentially conflicting interests of the District, the District Board members and the nonprofit, we have determined that we should withdraw from providing legal services." Chief Assistant Attorney General Matthew Rodriguez wrote in a Dec. 1 memo to the Fair Board.

Fair board members had created their own nonprofit foundation to potentially buy the fairgrounds, which the state was eyeing to sell and raise money to fill a massive budget deficit.

However, the foundation was accused of lacking transparency and illegally using public money to pay for lobbyists to influence the sale of the site. Momentum around a movement to halt the sale of the fairgrounds increased as residents, city and county officials and supports clamored in opposition.

Some founding members of the nonprofit dropped out; ultimately, the foundation did not place a bid for the site at the state's January auction.

Fairgrounds staffers are expected to put together a strategic plan concerning the sale of the site by early next month. The state is expected to make a decision on whether a high bidder, Craig Realty, should own the property.

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