

National agency to settle local food banks' dispute

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7-7-93
WATSONVILLE — The national organization that controls the majority of donations to the area's food bank soon will make a ruling that could end a fight over who can best feed the hungry.

The board of directors of the National Second Harvest Food Bank Network in Chicago holds many of the cards in a three-year dispute between two charities: the well-established Food and Nutrition Services; and the upstart Food Bank Services, a rival group started by former members of the FNS food bank's operating board. Both have non-profit status.

The national Second Harvest prefers that charities under its wing be incorporated separately to encourage efficiency, and grants special exemptions for those that are part of larger groups, as is the case for Food and Nutrition Services.

In addition to running the local Second Harvest Food Bank, FNS also operates a variety of social-service programs including senior meals, child care and transportation services. The Food Bank is a \$650,000 program in the overall FNS budget of \$7 million.

Denial of Food and Nutrition Services' exemption would clear the way for Food Bank Services, the Watsonville-based group challenging FNS for the right to operate the area's food bank, serving Monterey, San Benito and Santa

Cruz counties.

The support of the national Second Harvest organization is crucial, since the group provides 60 percent of the food donated to the local food bank. The blessings of Second Harvest are also an important facet of fund-raising, said Sister Christine Vladimiroff, president of the national Second Harvest Food Bank Network.

Food Bank Services boasts the support of the area's agriculture industry — major donors of surplus food — and claims it can raise money better and feed the hungry with less overhead than its former ally FNS.

Until the national Second Harvest board decides on the exempt status for FNS, the dispute is more or less on the back burner. The county Board of Supervisors, when doling out community program funding June 25, decided to grant FNS its \$50,000 in total county contributions on a month-to-month basis, with an eye on the upcoming verdict from the national Second Harvest office.

A final decision is forthcoming, Vladimiroff said.

"We would like to have this resolved within a week or two at the most," said Vladimiroff.

Though FNS has routinely been granted exemptions in the past — it's one of only five food banks in the country to receive such status — Vladimiroff said "there are some complications this time around," namely the challenge by

Food Bank Services.

"We want to give it some very serious reflection," said Vladimiroff. "It's a very difficult issue. Food and Nutrition has been a very significant organization in the community. They have sponsored and continue to sponsor many very valuable programs. They founded and supported a food bank when it couldn't have supported itself," said Vladimiroff.

But along comes a trusted, experienced rival that has "a desire to function in a different way ... as a colleague of Food and Nutrition and not as a program," said Vladimiroff.

"It's a difficult call," she said. "We need to make a good decision and a wise decision. That's why we do not want to rush it."

Meanwhile, the 80 food pantries in the tri-county area that receive food from FNS are watching the dispute with a great deal of interest and a little bit of fear.

"They're scared," said Annette Marcum, volunteer director of Valley Churches United, a charity and food pantry serving the San Lorenzo Valley-Scotts Valley area.

"(The pantries) don't know what this underworks is all about — it's so confusing — and neither does the public."

Vladimiroff said, "Certainly our goal is that service to the real beneficiaries of the food bank — the hungry people — continue on uninterrupted."