A dubious deal?

San Bernardino County supervisors need to offer the public a better explanation for their generosity to a large campaign contributor. How does spending $102 million to settle a lawsuit benefit county taxpayers? The settlement and supervisors' handling of the case just raise too many unanswered questions.

Supervisors Bill Postmus, Paul Blanc and Gary Ovitt voted Tuesday to pay developer Colonies Partners $102 million to end a 2002 lawsuit over land for public flood control at a 434-acre Upland development. But the circumstances surrounding this deal remain murky.

The county's outside law firm handling the case resigned abruptly a day after the board approved the settlement. Why? Supervisor Dennis Hanify suggests the law firm quit because the attorneys found the agreement unjustifiable. So, did any of the county's legal advisers recommend this settlement? Don't forget Blanc and Postmus pushed a $77 million settlement with Colonies in 2006 that county lawyers opposed as too expensive and flawed.

Meantime, the supervisors say the huge payout won't significantly affect flood control operations. Yet the county flood control district will spend about a fourth of its discretionary budget annually for at least a decade to pay off the settlement. Does the district really have that much fat in its budget?

The supervisors insisted, too, that taxpayers could be liable for $300 million if the county didn't settle. But why did the supervisors treat as fact the Colonies' claim of $300 million in damages? The number was actually in legal dispute.

What's not disputable is that Postmus, Blanc and Ovitt collected tens of thousands of dollars in campaign donations from the Colonies since the onset of the lawsuit.

The supervisors call the Colonies deal a win for taxpayers. But the supervisors need to provide stronger evidence for that claim before county residents can trust this deal.