Nutting trial has far-reaching political ramifications

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

Ray Nutting goes on trial for felony malfeasance Tuesday, and the political rancor is seething in El Dorado County.

In the courtroom, Nutting, a four-term county supervisor, faces prosecution for alleged misconduct related to state grants he took for clearing brush on his family ranch. But it is the spectacle surrounding his case that envelops this county east.

The prosecution of the veteran timber rancher, a stout defender of private property rights and a hero to tea party conservatives, is revealing angry divisions within the local Republican Party faithful and deep-rooted antagonisms in a county long known for its bare-knuckled politics.

In typically procedural court documents, District Attorney Vern Pierson and his top prosecutor call Nutting a "hypocrite" and blast him for supporting "puppet candidates" for office and directing "underhanded efforts … to try his case in the media."

In turn, Nutting ripped the prosecutor, saying, "Pierson is ruthless and will stoop to the lowest levels" to destroy his enemies.

The trial has been preceded by months of angry theatrics as Nutting supporters have jammed meetings of the Board of Supervisors, protesting what they consider "bullying" tactics of a powerful county auditor-controller, Joe Harn, who triggered the prosecution by alerting the district attorney to

alleged discrepancies in Nutting's invoices for state-funded work on his ranch.

Critics of the supervisor, who has recused himself from virtually every board action since his indictment, are calling on him to step down. Meanwhile, divisions over the trial permeate county election races.

The actual legal proceedings, People of the State of Californa v. Raymond James Nutting, will take place at the turn-of-the century courthouse in Old Placerville. A retired state appellate judge from outside the county, Timothy S. Buckley, will preside over the trial because El Dorado judges recused themselves from the case.

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