

Bureau doesn't give a Dam about Hoover's snack bar



John L.
Smith

Who says the mob has a lock on the protection racket?

The Randolph-Shephard Act was created to help provide job opportunities for the blind. It does not allow rent charges, hot dog taxes or outright extortion.

Of course, that will be one of many points of contention raised when Hansen and his fellow blind vendors begin arbitration with the bureau.

"We believe there's been a definite shift in the circumstances here," Bureau of Reclamation Area Manager Blaine Hamann says. "The situation as we see it here is markedly different than it was. It's not our intention at all to evict them."

Only to collect a little rent now that Hoover Dam, with its new visitors center and parking garage, is on the verge of becoming a mega-attraction.

Hansen's concessions stand has

grown from a small shack into a 50-foot by 80-foot building, which Hansen operates at a profit.

"Now that we're successful, they're saying 'We want a part of it,'" Hansen, 54, says. "They didn't care when there weren't 100 federal employees working here. Now all of a sudden they're using it as a basis not to allow us to continue there."

Dam officials will have some explaining to do. It won't be easy for an agency strapped with millions in cost overruns for its Hoover Dam renovation to win popular support.

It's probably not the best time to start stealing from blind snack bar operators.

After all, they appear to be paying their bills.

A percentage of profits from the 25 blind-operated vending stations located in local, state and federal government buildings are responsible for funding the business enterprise program of Nevada's Bureau of Services to the Blind and Visually Impaired.

For the record, Nevada's blind business operation is the only self-sustaining program of its kind in the nation. Its future is at risk if the feds begin skimming from the lucrative Hoover Dam Snacketeria, state Direc-

tor Mervin J. Flander says: "The facilities at Hoover Dam are mainstay operations that contribute largely to the self-sustaining status of the program."

The Bureau of Reclamation has more than the Randolph-Shephard Act working against it. It also must fight the perception that it is forcing blind operators to help rescue the federal agency's own multimillion-dollar miscalculation at Hoover Dam.

Talk about the blind leading the blind.

This isn't the first time the Bureau of Reclamation has attempted to extract a piece of the action from the visually impaired. Its officials lost a similar fight when attempting to oust the blind vendors at Grand Coulee Dam.

Will its luck improve at Hoover Dam?

Not if Hansen and Flander have their way.

Given all those cost overruns by the so-called experts, and Hansen's record of success with hot dogs and coffee mugs, perhaps the Bureau of Reclamation ought to consider allowing Nevada's blind businessmen to supervise the Hoover Dam renovation.

John L. Smith's column appears Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday.