

Deal if you must, Valley reps, but deal with us honestly

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By Bill McEwen / The Fresno Bee

On the afternoon of March 11 in the White House dining room, President Barack Obama met with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus on health care and immigration reform.

Rep. Jim Costa of Fresno was last to speak. Armed with unemployment rates released a day earlier, Costa recited some: Fresno County 18.2%, Kern County 17.1%, Mendota 44%, Delano 30.3%.

“You have not focused enough on the problems of the Valley,” Costa told the president. “You need to respond adequately to the housing and water crisis.”

Fast forward to the final hours before the House’s approval of the historic health-care reform bill. Costa and Rep. Dennis Cardoza of Merced stood accused of trading their votes for bigger water deliveries to farmers.

“California Rep. Jim Costa bragged publicly that during his meeting in the Oval Office, he’d demanded the administration increase water to his Central Valley district,” Kimberley A. Stassel wrote in a Wall Street Journal column. “On Tuesday, Interior pushed up its announcement, giving the Central Valley farmers 25% of water supplies, rather than the expected 5% allocation.”

Conservative talk-show hosts made similar water-for-health-vote claims, as did Republican Congressman Devin Nunes of Visalia.

Costa and Cardoza denied their support of health-care reform was linked to water allocation.

“I’ve been fighting for water for 30 years,” Costa reiterated to me Wednesday. “As early as January, we’d talked about getting a 25% to 30% commitment — the sooner the better, so farmers could get loans from banks based on water allocation. Nobody knew when the vote was going to be on health care.”

Costa said that he only voted yes after seeing the Congressional Budget Office score of the

bill and receiving local assurance that reform wouldn't financially bury hospitals serving large numbers of poor patients, such as Community Medical Centers in Fresno.

But you can bet that Obama knew who was — and wasn't — on board with health reform when he met with the Hispanic Caucus, whose membership includes Cardoza.

So, did the congressmen do something worthy of outrage? Or, are complaints about their votes merely an attempt to stoke the fires for Republican victory in November?

The reality is, there probably was some kind of understanding between the administration and the holdout congressmen — but it may have well been unspoken.

Mark Keppler, executive director of the nonpartisan Maddy Institute at Fresno State, said horse-trading is part of politics.

"You don't negotiate in a vacuum," Keppler said. "You have to engage in give and take.

"There are people and those in the press who want to see negotiations in public. But when you negotiate with the cameras rolling, people posture. Real negotiations happen behind closed doors, when people will be honest."

Obama, of course, promised a new transparency during his presidential campaign. This created an expectation that the ugly days of sausage-making would end.

Given human nature, that's too much to ask. But I was hoping for something better than a process straight out of former Republican Majority Leader Tom DeLay's playbook.