

Teachers union ad goes too far for Niello family

IMAGE OF DEALERSHIP BRINGS IN LAWYERS

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Assemblyman Roger Niello is just fine when his critics heckle him for opposing tax hikes.

But when a mobile billboard campaign funded by a teachers union used the image of his family's car dealership, the lawyers quickly got involved.

It all started late last week when a small group of teachers and activists canvassed Niello's Fair Oaks neighborhood - and that of fellow area Republicans, Sen. Dave Cox of Fair Oaks and Assemblyman Alan Nakanishi of Lodi.

Their mission, said Dean Murakami, president of the Los Rios College Federation of Teachers, was to urge the lawmakers' neighbors to push the GOP trio to approve more funding for schools and health care.

Niello wasn't home when they came a-knocking, though his wife was.

"It was just fine," said Niello, the Assembly GOP's point man on the budget, which is a month overdue and \$15.2 billion in the hole. "They had a message that they articulated well - I just don't agree with it."

Then on Monday, the teachers un-

veiled a roving billboard. "Close tax loopholes," read the ad. "Not schools, fire stations and health clinics!"

"The leaping logic on that statement is a bit tortured," argued Niello, who insists he doesn't want to close schools, fire stations or health clinics.

More problematic was that the billboard looked like the license-plate holder of the Niello Co., the Sacramento-area car dealership. The assemblyman and his two brothers own the company that has been selling cars in the capital since 1955.

One of Niello's brothers called in the lawyers.

"You are creating a false association between Roger Niello, the politician, and my client, The Niello Company," attorney John Costello wrote to the union.

Murakami said they've agreed to take down the offending image. "We were just surprised because we didn't think it was a big deal," Murakami said. "We didn't realize we were infringing any copyright."

Murakami added the ad wasn't an "underhanded" effort to slow Niello car sales.

For his part, Niello said he has "no quarrel with them expressing their opinion," but the whole campaign struck him as "a bit sophomoric."

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