

Let's make a deal - Second casino workshop draws another big crowd

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By Kelly Enos (kenos@ledger-dispatch.com)

For the second time in two weeks, a community workshop on a proposed Indian casino near Lone drew a large audience, this time in the unincorporated community of Buena Vista, where the controversial project is to be built.

Wednesday's meeting inside the clubhouse at the Oaks Mobile Home Park on Jackson Valley Road was only a few miles from the site of a possible casino development on roughly 17 acres of Rancheria land belonging to the Buena Vista Band of Me-Wuk Indians. Located on the east side of Coal Mine Road, the project would include between 950 to 1,650 slot machines, down from the 2,000 outlined in the tribe's final environmental impact report.

That was one of the capitulations of a tentative intergovernmental services agreement hashed out by the tribe and county. Along with the reduced size, the county would drop its lawsuit against the U.S. Department of the Interior, which has been pending in the federal court system for three years and seeks to block the tribe's efforts. The ISA, as it's known, also includes \$8 million in annual payments to the county, intended to make the project more palatable to a county with a casino already in Jackson, and plans by a third tribe to build one near Plymouth. The board of supervisors will vote on whether to accept the agreement at its Feb. 26 meeting.

"The nation and the state have turned their backs on Amador County and us as residents," said County Administrative Officer Terri Daly in opening the meeting. "We have fought along with 85 percent of you voting against more gaming in our county, but the state is telling the tribe, 'Yes you can have a casino.' We now face a decision."

The question and answer session Wednesday was the second in a series of five workshops intended to gather input, with the mood more civil than the one at last week's workshop in Lone. That may have been due to a switch in format. Rather than taking public comment, which led to several caustic remarks last Wednesday, county representatives had attendees submit written questions, the bulk of which sought answers to possible impacts to law enforcement, groundwater and fire protection.

The county now faces two options, having been "discouraged" from continuing its legal fight, according to Daly, due to hitting "brick walls" that led to closed door negotiations with the tribe last summer after the release of the tribe's final EIR. If the county continues its legal fight, which includes a challenge regarding the tribe's historical tie to the land, Daly said the matter would likely go to arbitration, in which one of two project proposals is chosen and the stipulations the county has achieved in the ISA evaporate.

"By virtue of the tribe's compact, there will be a casino," Daly said. "The only thing arbitration will result in is less for the county, but it will allow us to continue with the lawsuit."

Sheriff Martin Ryan answered questions from the floor regarding the potential impacts another casino in the area would cause a local police force that is already understaffed.

"Under the agreement the county has negotiated with the tribe, law enforcement will receive annually \$2.7 million," Ryan explained. "With this agreement, we will have two 24/7 officers that (will) patrol from the San Joaquin County line to Pine Grove, whereas now we have one."

Ryan added that the agreement will also fund four additional California Highway Patrol officers, a supervisor and an investigative supervisor, both of which the county does not currently have. Ryan's role in the agreement was to serve as an advisor to the board of supervisors on the negative impacts law enforcement could face. He also studied the impacts of casinos to other rural communities, like Thunder Valley in Lincoln and Cache Creek, which is also located in a rural area.

"Cache Creek Casino had law enforcement calls go up 30 percent when they started to serve alcohol," Ryan said. "Currently, three of the 76 beds in our jail are occupied by Jackson Rancheria arrests 365 days of the year and that is a non-alcohol casino. That is how we feel about the impacts to our jail. We are concerned about drunk drivers on our rural roads."

As part of the ISA, the Buena Vista casino wouldn't be allowed to serve alcohol on the gaming floor.

As far as fire protection, Mike Kirkley, division chief of the Amador-El Dorado Unit of CAL FIRE, also conducted surveys with similar casino locations and served as an advisor to the board on negotiations for fire protection.

"We came up with what we needed as far as fire protection and, under the agreement, we will have a full-time, staffed department in Camanche along with two engines and four 24/7 paid firefighters on duty," he said. The tribe would pay \$3.1 million annually under the agreement for fire fighting, staffing and a new wildland fire engine. And according to Kirkley, "the tribe will also be required to pay for the construction of a new facility for fire protection."

County Environmental Health Director Mike Israel addressed concerns regarding groundwater and said his office felt the study the tribe had done was not extensive enough, calling it "borderline at best." But he said he believed the negotiations on water quality had achieved "the best they can do," with a monitoring group having been formed with members of both parties. In the event of a negative impact, Kirkley said



Dozens of county residents turned out to the second community workshop on a proposed casino near Buena Vista to ask questions about the project. With three more workshops scheduled, the board of supervisors will decide whether to accept an intergovernmental services agreement with the Buena Vista Band of Me-Wuk Indians at its Feb. 26 meeting.

Photo by: [Kelly Enos](#)

the requirements direct the tribe to reopen negotiations with the county in which the board can then set new stipulations.

In total, the county stands to gain annual payments in excess of \$8 million with additional money being paid to the city of Lone, toward road improvements, a new jail construction and reimbursement for all legal fees the county has so far incurred.

According to county attorney Cathy Christian, every state that allows gaming is required to negotiate with tribes on gaming and it's never an easy situation. "I am unaware of any community that has been able to stop gaming in their community," she said. "It is what the (federal government) has given tribes as their right."

The next workshop will be Saturday, Feb. 16, from 1 to 3 p.m. in the board of supervisors chambers at the County Administration Center. Visit www.co.amador.ca.us for more information.

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