

Residents want county to continue casino fight

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By Jerry Budrick (jbudrick@ledger-dispatch.com)

Amador County residents from Ione, Lake Camanche and beyond came to Evalynn Bishop Hall in Ione Wednesday night for the first of five scheduled Buena Vista Casino Workshops.

County officials recently released details of a pending negotiated intergovernmental services agreement between the county and the Buena Vista Rancheria of Me-Wuk Indians for a proposed casino near Ione, what would be the county's second.

According to the announcement of the workshops, the county is faced with two options: continued litigation opposing a casino or acceptance of the negotiated ISA. Eighteen members of the community spoke in favor of litigation, none for acceptance of the ISA.

Facing the residents was a wide table populated by nine representatives from various county agencies, prepared to respond to questions presented by members of the public.

"This is not a done deal," said District 2 Supervisor Richard Forster, chair of the board of supervisors, as he began the proceedings. Forster assured the crowd that the purpose of the workshop was to gather public input and answer questions.

Tom Bamert, an Ione resident who was Forster's predecessor on the board, made a brief statement: "I hope what I see here is opposition, not support. The dollars they are throwing at us won't make up for the harm this casino will produce."

But as Cathy Christian, a Sacramento attorney hired by the county to provide outside counsel, explained, "Amador County has been put between a rock and a hard place. It's a rotten situation. The tribe can start a casino no matter what."

County Administrative Officer Terri Daly added to Christian's comments, saying, "The county has been steadfastly opposed, but the federal government gave the tribe permission to build a casino." The county filed a lawsuit three years ago, but has received no response from Washington.

Faced with a lengthening line of prospective questioners, Daly added, "All of the people with the answers are here tonight so the public can ask them directly."

And ask they did.

George Lambert, Ione's former interim city manager, suggested the possibility of involving the tribe in seeking a response from Washington. Christian responded with, "The tribe is not a party to the case." The lawsuit, it turns out, is technically against the federal government. Even if the tribe is willing to cooperate, it does not have what is called "legal standing."

Joan Villa, a member of the Ione Band of Miwok Indians, wanted to know about the level of involvement of attorney Dennis Whittlesea, with whom she had formerly been involved. When informed that Whittlesea was indeed still in the mix, Villa requested that he be removed.

Concerned about the danger of increased crime in her neighborhood, Tina Wurzburger was told by Sheriff Martin Ryan that the substantial annual payment of \$2.7 million proposed by the tribe for law enforcement and criminal justice would provide "some semblance of protection. Gaming takes a terrible toll on our community."

Fire protection was prominently discussed as well. Mike Kirkley, division chief of the the Amador-El Dorado Unit of CAL FIRE, made a case for negotiating by noting that arbitrators are most likely to look at many budget items with an eye toward "fair share," which would yield virtually nothing to a county where the fire protection is strictly volunteer. "The fair share of zero is zero," he said.

Heartfelt concern by the residents became the order of the night.

Water, both what comes out of the faucets and what will go down the drains, was a recurrent consideration. Mike Israel, director of the county's Environmental Health Department, predicted a need for 40 to 50,000 gallons of water per day. If that quantity of water is not available from wells or if the casino's wells draw down the water table too far, he said, "There may be other sources available." When pressed for names of other sources, Israel's mention of Jackson Valley Irrigation District water brought the evening's only chorus of "no's." For wastewater, he said, "The plan is to construct a tertiary treatment plant."

Traffic, a mounting issue countywide, came up many times. Three traffic signals are included in the ISA. Financial responsibility for their maintenance came into question. People spoke about single-lane roads in the area, 20 school bus stops, flooding of the roads, dangerous tight curves, careless drivers, wagons and horses on the roads, and alcohol.

Friends of Amador County representative Jerry Cassessi noted that, "The perception is that the county is trying to sell this ISA to the people." In an inclusive presentation, Cassessi mentioned a billionaire backer of the casino project, later identified as Thomas Wilmot of Rochester, New York. "Some things are more important than money," he said.

A passionate lifelong resident with family ties to the county going back to 1846, Noel W. Stewart exhorted the assembled officials to "make a better agreement with the tribe than we made with (East Bay Municipal Utilities District) in 1922, when we gave away our water rights. I know you can be ornery and you should be."

Dominic Atlan of Castle Oaks chided the panel for what he called "a defeatist attitude. Thunder Valley Casino brings in \$350 million. Anything

is financially feasible at this level. With 85 percent opposition (to new casinos in the county), the supervisors have a mandate to continue fighting."

Residents will have four more workshops to make their case, with the next one scheduled for Wednesday, Feb. 13, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the Oaks Mobile Home Park, 5607 Jackson Valley Road, Buena Vista.

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