



Fresno Bee Op-Ed

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By **Elaine Bethel-Fink**

The North Fork Rancheria has worked in a partnership with local, state and federal entities to bring jobs and economic opportunity to our region through a proposed casino resort project.

At the local level, every Madera jurisdiction has joined our partnership. Every business chamber has embraced the promise of jobs, business opportunity and community investment. Labor unions, civic groups, ethnic organizations, the majority of local tribes and thousands of Madera citizens have endorsed the project and process.

At the state level, we've adhered to the California State Association of Counties (CSAC) principles governing Indian gaming that emphasize transparency, mitigation of potential impacts, and collaboration. As a result, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger recently signed a gaming compact with the tribe and signaled his intention to support federal approval of the tribe's trust application. The compact highlighted the project's environmental and economic advantages -- and strong local support for locating it along Highway 99.

Diligent eyes

At the federal level, the project is progressing under the diligent eye of the

Valley needs Madera casino more than ever to improve struggling economy

Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Indeed, the North Fork project was one of a handful nationwide that recently survived a tightening of the BIA's criteria governing so called "off-reservation" projects.

Throughout this rigorous federal process, residents have had numerous opportunities to learn about and comment on the project at hearings conducted by the city of Madera, Madera County, Fresno County, the state Senate Governmental Operations Committee, the BIA and the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs.

In March of this year, nearly 800 individuals attended the public hearing on the draft environmental review prepared by the BIA in cooperation with federal, state and local agencies. Roughly 100 individuals spoke -- no speaker was turned away -- including a majority in support of the project. Nearly two-dozen Madera officials spoke in favor and not one against. In contrast, fewer than a dozen private Madera residents spoke against the project, and most comments challenging the project came from officials, tribal members and hired advisers affiliated with two competing gaming tribes.

This level of local support is not surprising. Maderans supported by margins of nearly two to one 5 and 1A, allowing tribes to use gaming as a means of economic development. By a similar margin, Maderans supported the North Fork project in a scientifically

conducted poll using straight-forward questions provided by the governor's office.

Local support for the proposed development has grown as the regional economy has worsened. Falling employment, government-revenue, home-ownership and private-investment numbers are now rampant throughout the San Joaquin Valley. The Bee recently reported that the 20th Congressional District -- encompassing parts of Fresno, Kings and Kern counties -- ranked dead last in a national ranking of the overall well-being of residents. Even notoriously poor Appalachia fared better than areas represented by project critic state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter.

Our proposed casino will help matters by providing an immediate, massive, privately funded, economic stimulus -- nearly \$300 million for initial construction and \$2.5 billion over the project life. The resort will generate \$100 million annually -- or about \$12,000 every hour -- in wages, goods and services purchased and public funding for Madera and the region.

All this calls into question the motivations of Sen. Florez and The Bee in opposing the North Fork project. Just days after the congressional report was released, the senator from Kern County turned away from the pressing economic issues of his own constituents to sign yet another Bee op-ed against the Madera project, this time

ranting against the BIA and distorting the intent of the Indian gaming ballot initiatives.

Misinformed critics

Attacks against the North Fork project are typically filled with misinformation. Now they are increasingly suspect given the massive campaign and advertising contributions Sen. Florez and The Bee receive from the very Indian casinos seeking to delay the North Fork project.

Serious conflicts of interest abound.

This small but deep-pocketed cohort of opponents have now attacked every good-faith partner involved in bringing the resort project to Madera -- from local voters and elected officials, to the tribe, the governor, and now the federal government and even the California initiative process. These opponents do not reflect the will of the region -- only the self-interests of a few who are already benefiting from Indian gaming.

Madera County -- like Kern County and the entire San Joaquin Valley -- wants, needs and deserves economic relief now, not further obstructionism and disingenuous rhetoric from special interests. At \$12,000 an hour, the time for the North Fork project is now.

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