



Fresno Bee

Op-Ed

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By Elaine Bethel-Fink

The proposed North Fork destination hotel and casino resort will immediately jump start our region's faltering economy by providing nearly \$2.5 billion in economic activity over the next 20 years -- if it's given a chance.

At a time when our national economy is shedding more than 500,000 jobs a month, some officials have called our privately funded project a "once in a generation" economic development opportunity capable of generating more than 4,000 local jobs.

Union leaders, contractors, engineering and construction firms have endorsed our project, based on the planned \$250 million in construction outlays and 750 jobs that will help resuscitate the collapsed local building industry. Every jurisdiction and business chamber in Madera, as well as many surrounding ones, have embraced the \$100 million a year in economic benefits our project will generate to help combat decades of unrelenting Central Valley poverty and despair.

Companies throughout the Valley have become excited by the prospect of competing for \$45 million to \$50 million in annual vendor purchases belonging to the project.

Nonprofit organizations have joined nearly 5,000 citizens in applauding our tribe's legally binding commitments to deliver \$5 million a year in public safety, education, economic development, youth and recreation, infrastructure and other community project funding.

The City of Madera, City of Chowchilla, Madera County, Madera Irrigation District, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bureau of Indian Affairs, the U.S. Department of Interior, Caltrans, the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the National Indian Gaming Commission and other agencies have served as co-operating agencies on the environmental impact statement being prepared by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to ensure that the North Fork project fits both the needs of our community and the environment. All these supporters and partners believe the project's contributions will strengthen the strained social fabric of our community by providing jobs, economic vitality and improved community services.

Over the past five years, our tribe has worked diligently, transparently and collaboratively to advance this economic dream. Our strong legal and historical claims, adherence to the letter and spirit of the law, tradition and practice of partnership and development partner Station Casinos' solid reputation and commitment to the project have all contributed to the

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remarkable support and progress we've enjoyed so far. As a result, we're closer than ever to fulfilling this dream -- exactly at a time when our region needs it more than ever. With some more hard work and good luck, we may even break ground in 2009 -- an event that would immediately and positively stimulate the regional job market and economy. Yet much remains to be done.

The San Joaquin Valley is a great place to live, work and play. We should know: The Western Mono people have enjoyed the bounty of this region for centuries

But life in the Valley has always had its challenges, even before the recent economic collapse. Native peoples, migrant workers and other immigrant populations have endured centuries of substandard conditions in our own backyard. Study after study has chronicled the serious obstacles facing hard-working, decent Valley citizens in putting food on the table, obtaining good-paying jobs, getting a decent education and buying -- and more recently keeping -- a home. And things have only gotten worse.

Our project won't cure all these woes, especially when the bad economy is hurting even the normally recession-resistant gaming industry. Such conditions make it harder for us to build and turn a profit in the short term; But they also make it more important that we get started to help our local economy over the long term.

It astounds us then to see some within our community still bent on tearing down perfectly good ideas and projects like ours without proposing any reasonable options.

In such economic times, we have a simple question for those who oppose the kind of growth and opportunity represented by the North Fork project: What is your alternative plan for providing dignity and hope through employment? For keeping local businesses open and thriving? For offering essential public funding to neighborhoods and communities?

Don't get us wrong, our tribe welcomes all forms of advice and constructive criticism -- as long as it comes with a genuine interest in working together to address the needs of our region, not merely special interests.

Much needs to be done to remedy the current economic mess. We must work together, and quickly, before things get worse. We must embrace solutions as big as the problems we face, solutions like the "once in a generation" North Fork project. We must put aside personal biases and agendas and do what's right for the Valley and nation. We must say, "yes" to hope and opportunity and "no" to fear, greed and cynicism. We invite everyone to join our North Fork tribe in this "once in a generation" endeavor.

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