



FRESNO BEE

Opinion

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By Elaine Bethel Fink

Through tribal gaming, American Indian tribes have a unique opportunity to improve the lives of their citizens while contributing to the well-being of surrounding communities. Chukchansi Gold is proof that tribal gaming can serve these purposes with overwhelmingly positive results.

They include good jobs and opportunities; strong diversified economies; healthy, vibrant local communities; improved infrastructure; lower taxes; few people on welfare; and self-sufficient Indian tribes.

The promises of positive benefits are what the voters of Madera and California envisioned in supporting casinos on Indian lands. And these benefits are exactly what the proposed North Fork Rancheria project -- an economic development plan for a gaming and entertainment resort on the tribe's historic lands on Highway 99 in rural Madera County -- will deliver if we and other tribes work together.

To achieve the results mentioned above for our nearly 1,400 tribal citizens and the larger community, the North Fork Rancheria has tirelessly and transparently navigated the arduous legal process

established for tribes without a viable land base like ours to acquire gaming-eligible trust lands on lands our people have used and occupied for centuries. We have also reached out to our friends and relatives, the Chukchansi, to seek common ground and possible partnership.

Rather than work with us to build a better Madera County together, the leaders of the Chukchansi Tribe have unfortunately accepted the advice of high-priced public relations firms and attorneys who feed off controversy and know and care little about our tribes' shared history and community.

These out-of-state and out-of-touch advisers counsel competition before cooperation, conflict before community. The negative smear tactics recently employed against incumbents and challengers in the upcoming elections have dismayed our tribal citizens and threaten to create a serious rift between communities that once commingled, co-habited and cooperated.

The resulting Indian vs. Indian approach perpetuates the sad stereotype of Indians fighting Indians and risks creating a backlash against all Indian gaming. The North Fork Rancheria believes we can and must work with the Chukchansi Tribe to shift this negativity

toward a more constructive model of cooperation and healthy competition.

Working together means generating more employment and business opportunities for more people. Chukchansi Gold recently discussed plans to expand, indicating excess local demand for the types of jobs and entertainment that casinos can provide.

Based on countless examples throughout the country, North Fork's proposed development will likely increase Chukchansi's business as the region becomes a destination hub for tourism at the gateway to the Sierra. Working collaboratively, our individual resorts could grow the collective local market by attracting new regional, national and international customers.

In the time-honored tradition of local tribes that lived, worked and hunted together, we encourage our Chukchansi relatives to collaborate with us and other community resources to create the true destination entertainment market that the North Fork Rancheria and other community leaders envision.

We call on our Chukchansi relatives to adopt North Fork Rancheria's transparent, collaborative, by-the-book approach to work out any differences

between our tribes' respective goals and dreams.

Surely our shared values, histories and aspirations are stronger and more important than the political, commercial and ideological forces currently working to divide us. We should resolve our issues through trust building efforts with each other and with other interested parties in Madera County.

Through "co-opetition" - a blend of competition and cooperation - the Picayune Rancheria of the Chukchansi Indians and North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians could become a model for other Indian tribes in California to create healthier, more vibrant communities and economies while banishing the negative stereotypes of greedy, bickering Indians.

Working together, we could create a new approach to Indian gaming that stresses not only responsible development, but brings much-needed jobs, investment, opportunities and entertainment to all the people of Madera County.

It's time to build a better Madera, together.

Elaine Bethel-Fink is the chairperson of the Tribal Council of the North Fork Rancheria.