



## FRESNO BEE

### Opinion

WEDNESDAY

APRIL 5, 2006

## Indian gaming is good for the tribes, Valley

I support tribal government gaming such as the proposed North Fork Rancheria project because it is the law of the land and it benefits tribes as well as California counties and communities.

The right of tribes to game is undeniable: It is derived from their inherent sovereignty as recognized in the U.S. Constitution, affirmed by successive court rulings and reinforced overwhelmingly by California Propositions 5 and 1A.

Indian gaming law allows "Indian gaming on Indian lands." Every tribal casino built must satisfy that basic requirement, and there are no loopholes to the established, well-tested federal process for qualifying Indian gaming projects. As an elected official, I am sworn to uphold the laws of the land. I am also obligated to consider the interests of all constituents, not just a vocal minority.

Though I understand and respect those who oppose gaming for moral reasons, I cannot pick and choose which laws to uphold based on personal preferences or religious beliefs, nor can I protect the interests of the few over the common good.

Congress intended Indian gaming law "to provide a statutory foundation for Indian gambling operations as a means of promoting economic development, self-sufficiency and strong tribal government."

Luckily, Indian gaming has delivered on much of its promise and proven unequalled as an economic development tool.

Reservations are recovering from decades of failed government programs. Indians and non-Indians are proudly leaving welfare rolls and getting payroll checks.

Local and state governments are enjoying increased job creation — jobs that pay living wages and provide medical insurance, the ability to purchase goods and services and the opportunity to buy a home.

Gaming helps tribes build houses and schools, fund health care and education, provide for the general welfare of their citizens and develop strong, diverse economies.

Last, but not least, I support tribal government gaming because it is good public policy for California, the central San Joaquin Valley and especially Madera County.

According to a recent University of California at Riverside study, tribal gaming improves the social and economic conditions of tribes and neighboring communities and concentrates employment and other benefits in poorer, rural

counties like Madera and adjoining counties like Merced and Fresno where they are most needed.

Remember the 2003 Fresno Bee series "Broke and Broken," about too many people struggling to survive and a region that can't put all its people to work, and more recently, the Brookings Institution report identifying Fresno as No. 1 in pockets of poverty in the nation?

In California, Indian gaming has generated nearly 50,000 jobs, \$100 million for local governments and \$3.4 billion in additional household income. Locally, Chukchansi Gold Casino is our county's largest private employer and the proposed North Fork Rancheria resort will generate thousands of new jobs and hundreds of millions of dollars for the region's economy.

### Powerful development tool

Congress provided counties a powerful development tool when it allowed alternate gaming sites within a tribe's historic lands to be developed if larger public policy goals, such as environmental and land use, were served. Such "off-reservation" arrangements, though heavily scrutinized and very rare, are critical to local communities.

In the North Fork Rancheria case, the tribe and Madera County collaborated in a transparent, respectful and constructive "responsible development" approach that yielded an alternative preferred location for the casino within the tribe's historic lands, but removed

from consideration construction in the environmentally fragile foothills with its already overburdened transportation system and scarce water.

Opponents to this project, including competitive gaming tribes and certain out-of-area legislators, cynically brand such arrangements "reservation shopping," but they are misreading or misrepresenting the spirit and letter of the law. They must see beyond their next campaign donation and quit smearing legitimate projects and pitting tribe against tribe or risk fanning a popular backlash against Indian gaming.

In summary, as an elected official of Madera County, I am obligated to improve the lives of all citizens using all legal tools available. I support Indian gaming because it is the law and it works.

Indian gaming creates local jobs and assists in doing away with poverty. That is the experience in our county. That is the experience of local officials across the state and nation. That is why I support Indian gaming projects such as the proposed North Fork Rancheria development and the existing Chukchansi Gold Casino in Coarsegold.

**Gary Gilbert represents District 5 on the Madera County Board of Supervisors.**