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FRIDAY,
MARCH 14, 2008

Tribe encouraged by hearing: Majority of Maderans favor resort project

By June Woods

North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians came away from Wednesday night's hearing about the casino and resort planned for a site on state Route 99 and Avenue 17 with renewed confidence for the future of the plans.

"We're really confident," Charles Altekruise, spokesman for North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians, said Thursday. "As we saw last night, as people hear about the project, they become more comfortable with what's going on behind the scene and they're more supportive. Certainly we felt that last night."

A final analysis of comments and commenters at the hearing reveals an interesting dichotomy between those within the community and those coming from outside Madera. (A transcript covering the entire six-hour hearing will be released by Bureau of Indian Affairs.)

"Not one Madera official spoke in opposition to the project," Altekruise said. The majority of those who opposed the development, he said, were members of other tribes with casinos and economic interests of their own. Altekruise said the North Fork Tribe is still receiving letters of support from Maderans and expects to have received 5,000 such letters soon. Anyone desiring to submit their own letter may go to the North

Fork Rancheria Web site, www.northforkrancheria.com.

Comments and questions by Maderans at Wednesday night's meeting also indicated they were not drawn into the fray regarding tribal land and boundaries.

"I think that's because we have already demonstrated a connection to the land," Altekruise said.

The BIA has what Altekruise calls a "rigorous process" through the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act that restores ancestral land to tribes. In comparing the Mono claim to other's that have been successful, it seems unlikely the trust will be denied since the Mono Tribe, as a sovereign nation, has evidence it entered discussions with the U.S. Congress regarding the land now known as Madera in the 1850s, which in itself demonstrates a connection to the land.

"Another thing is that the federal government does allow (tribes), even without a connection, to work with local community to find a location that would be suitable," Altekruise said.

One thing Madera officials did not want, he said, is more of the county's pristine and environmentally-sensitive mountainous areas to be strewn with developments, especially commercial developments, which is why they worked with the tribe to find a

location they could all be happy with. Also, the rancheria land in the mountains, being acquired with HUD funds, is ineligible for gaming.

Altekruise touched on references by other tribes at Wednesday's hearing on Proposition 1A, which limits gaming to Indian land.

"If the project goes through," he said, "and this land gets put into public trust (as belonging to the Mono Indians), this will not be off-reservation gaming - so that issue will be moot." He also noted that the Mono tribe was not the only tribe trying to get lands restored to them.

"Even our friends, the Chukchansi, took additional land into trust by exactly the same process," he said. "That's all we're trying to do is get land into trust that recognizes and restores our historical claims."

Only three of 300 tribes have succeeded, he noted.

"So the concept of flood gates opening and massive reservation shopping driven by Las Vegas interests is just so much propaganda," Altekruise said. He called that objection propaganda that Maderans seem not to have fallen for since none of the objections by non-tribal Maderans touched on the issues of these claims.

Instead, those in the community who did come forward to make statements questioning the wisdom

of the development, stuck to issues pertinent to the draft environmental impact Statement, which was the subject of the hearing, and did not get sidetracked.

Maderans are concerned about their environment, about traffic, pollution, water, quality of life and economy, he said.

"My feeling is that the strategy of the opponents is to try to drag this out," Altekruise said. "Even the first comment in opposition was, 'I think you need a second hearing.'"

That comment was made by Morris Reid, gaming chairman for the Picayune Rancheria of the Chukchansi Indians' tribal council.

"They don't really mind the damage that this is doing to the Madera economy," Altekruise said. "Every day that this is delayed costs this community \$277,000 of economic benefits and activities - \$100 million over a year."

Altekruise said this stance was wrong at a time when Madera faces economic, fiscal and housing problems. "I don't think we can afford to have Chukchansi gum-up and delay the process any further," he said, "so I hope the BIA will look at all the substantive comments that were made last night, including the many that were made in support of our project, and we'll be able to move forward."