

January 18, 2009 The Davis Enterprise Op Ed

It's Not About The Money

Impacts to Capay Valley From the Cache Creek Casino and Resort Expansion Can Be Avoided Through Dedication to Long-Range Planning

By Helen M. Thomson
Yolo County Supervisor, District Two

Discussions broke down this month between Yolo County and the Rumsey Band of Wintun Indians over the Tribe's plans to address impacts from tripling the size of the Cache Creek Casino Resort. The matter is now headed for arbitration, which marks a sad milestone for Yolo County in its historic partnership with the Rumsey Tribe. But more unfortunate, I believe we missed an opportunity to take a broader view and engage in a joint long-term vision and plan for the Capay Valley and surrounding Yolo County.

For many years, the County and Tribe have worked together in harmony. Each shared a vision that sought to preserve a mutually valued quality of life for rural Yolo County. No where did this vision seem clearer than in the desire to respect the environment of Capay Valley. As Chairman, I was privileged to sign the first agreement we had with the Rumsey Tribe many years ago. And until recently, we at the County had every reason to believe this shared vision for preserving the environment would remain the centerpiece of the County's relationship with the Tribe. But the Tribal Environmental Impact Report (TEIR) for this expansion suggests otherwise. The Tribe's approach to reducing those substantial impacts from this expansion is simply inadequate given the magnitude of the expansion itself.

This ambitious expansion of the Casino and Resort includes a 10-story, 467-room hotel, new conference center and enough gaming floor space for potentially more than 5,000 additional slot machines, making Cache Creek among the largest slot machine casinos in the United States. But my main concern isn't with the proposal itself, but rather with the apparent neglect the Tribal EIR shows toward the expansion's environmental impacts. It scratches the surface, then seemingly decides to leave well enough alone once a set amount of money is paid for specific county services. The

County is prepared to accept the Tribe's current financial proposal for impacts to its county services.

But, this is not just about money. It never was simply about money alone. What no one can put a price on is the current quality of life in the Capay Valley. How much does it cost to have an established community of small, independent farms? What's the price tag on natural open space left free for native flora and fauna, with a pristine creek running through? Where can you buy a rural way of life where organic farms and orchards thrive? Well, you can't! And if your community already possesses those invaluable and irreplaceable qualities, then the only way to preserve them is to take an in-depth, comprehensive approach to long-term planning that recognizes how both the quality of life in a community and the impacts on that community's growth are intricately connected. To date, the Tribal EIR for this expansion ignores this fact.

Take traffic. Considering that Cache Creek will triple in size, the Tribe's estimate of a 37 percent increase in traffic flow is simply unrealistic and not born out of the reality of the traffic congestion analysis. As to paying for any road improvements at all, the Tribal EIR proposes to leave that decision to the State of California. But with the state budget crisis in historic desperation, how realistic is it to throw the problem at CalTrans and the taxpayers of California and then hope for the best? Not very!

Take wastewater. The Tribal EIR proposes cutting down a grove of 30 heritage oak trees to make room for a storage reservoir, and if that doesn't work, the contingency plan is to discharge treated wastewater into Cache Creek. This contingency becomes a distinct possibility when peak water demand is at just under a million gallons per day, as the expansion is expected to use. A much more comprehensive use of monitoring wells could provide early warnings about water levels and possible contamination, that need was also ignored.

There is a tremendous opportunity for the County and the Tribe to collaborate to identify mutually effective, workable solutions to these and other environmental impacts. The first challenge is thinking beyond the bottom line; doing not what is merely minimally required, but achieving what will actually work for the Tribe and the residents of Yolo County for the long term.

No one can buy, pay or compensate for the qualities that define the rural Capay Valley of today. Preserving them requires thinking and working together. It's my hope that arbitration will not be necessary and that the Tribe and the County can renew that "old" partnership that shares a common vision, and a shared dedication to the future of the Valley.

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