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Yolo Tribe Should Do What's 'Right'

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As we enter a new year, Yolo County yet again faces a familiar challenge: how can we work together to preserve the agricultural character of our community?

Today, a significant portion of our County remains undeveloped, either left as open space or dedicated to agriculture. Ours is a community clearly and deeply committed to agriculture. We made a deliberate choice to steer growth where it belongs, to the cities of Yolo County. The latest threat to this accomplishment doesn't come from housing developers, and not even necessarily from the tripling in size of the Cache Creek Casino Resort, but from how the Rumsey Band of Wintun Indians fail to satisfactorily mitigate impacts from this huge expansion.

In this, the Tribe's Environmental Impact Report, or TEIR, takes the path of least resistance. And that's why talks with the County are now headed for arbitration, despite years of sharing what we at the County thought was a mutually valued vision for protecting the rural character of Yolo County.

The Tribe's plan is to increase the size of the casino project from approximately 400,000 square-feet to over 1.2 million square feet. Currently, the casino houses at least 2,600 slot machines. This rivals the large casinos in Las Vegas. The Tribe presently has an agreement with the state to add as many more slots as they want. The increased size of this new casino could accommodate upwards of 7,000 slots, making Cache Creek one of the largest casinos in the world.

If a comparably large project were proposed by a private company, it would involve perhaps many years and require extensive study by planning experts and community input. That's because the EIR process was designed to carefully avoid lasting damage to the environment and a community's heritage and quality of life. But the Tribe's plan for the Cache Creek expansion goes through the motions and not much more. Unfortunately, this is the minimum standard allowed under the 2004 state compacts with gaming tribes. This is where gaming tribes have negotiated deals with state government that give them special rules. Casinos are now more or less free to install as many slot machines as they want, and as sovereign nations,

they can pretty much do what they want. The state of California receives \$25 million annually through Cache Creek, but none of that money comes to Yolo County and the brunt of bearing the casino's growth is borne by local residents. But this controversy isn't about money. It's about preserving Yolo County's agricultural integrity. And that's why I and others representing Yolo County feel compelled to insist that the Tribe's plan take a much more in-depth approach to anticipating impacts from expanding Cache Creek to three times its present size.

Answering a heavy increase in traffic is one of many challenges. The Tribe's plan proposes leaving the problem up to CalTrans, as cash-strapped these days as any other part of the state. Neither does the Tribe's plan adequately address water, a huge issue with the expansion to draw nearly a million gallons a day out of the ground during peak periods. It'll come from the same wells that supply the Capay Valley's family farms. Under the Tribe's plan, the resulting increase in demand for wastewater treatment capacity would be solved by replacing 30 heritage oak trees with a storage reservoir. If that still doesn't work, then the Tribe's plan proposes to discharge into a waterway leading to Cache Creek. The County suggested an extensive installation of closely watched monitoring wells to ensure safe and adequate water supplies for everyone in the Capay Valley. The proposals in the Tribe's plan opt for a significantly scaled-down approach to testing, which is again inadequate.

Air quality, affordable housing and the availability of public services are a few other vital areas that could experience significant changes. Looked at as a whole, the impacts could permanently transform the Capay Valley, and by extension Yolo County from what it is today, to what we've spent years trying to avoid. I believe the expansion can be made to Cache Creek, but ensuring that this super-sized casino resort operation doesn't alter quality of life will take a lot of hard work, hard work that's lacking in the current version of the Tribe's plan.

The Tribe needs to fully and completely mitigate for all of the impacts of the expansion, not just offer the legally required minimum. The Tribe's sovereign power should not trump the Tribe's responsibility to do the right thing.

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