

County criticizes casino study

By Jeffrey Mize
The Columbian

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — A final study on the proposed Cowlitz casino fails to evaluate the project’s effects and provides “unreliable and inadequate” information to federal decision-makers.

Clark County commissioners reached that conclusion during the county’s review of the final environmental impact statement released May 30.

Commissioners also noted that the study, prepared by Analytical Environmental Services of Sacramento, Calif., under the direction of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, ignores most of the county’s previous concerns or comments.

The study evaluates five different alternatives, along with a no-build option. Its preferred plan is to build a \$510 million casino complex on a 152-acre site west of La Center.

Commissioners, in comments mailed Monday to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, said alternatives that include gambling do not promote tribal self-governance because the Cowlitz would contract with a partnership involving the Mohegan Tribe to build and manage the complex for seven years.

That contractual arrangement would take money away from the tribe and make the Cowlitz reliant on an outside organization for management of the tribe’s primary asset, the county said.

One of the five options, a business park without any gambling, makes unrealistic assumptions and proposes “overbuilding in this market to an extent that no serious investor would entertain participation,” the county said.

Commissioners requested a new alternative, one that provides a mix of uses, such as retail, office and light-development with a casino.

Phil Harju, vice chairman of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe and its designated casino spokesman, said the county’s comments about the Mohegan Tribe “underscores what I would describe as a fundamental misunderstanding of tribal government and Indian law.”

Harju rejected the county’s contention that the casino study is “inadequate” and said the document “addresses all of the issues raised by the county in a comprehensive manner.”

How much weight the federal government will give the county’s comments isn’t known. Although federal officials will accept comments on the final environmental impact statement until Aug. 11, some Cowlitz officials have referred to the 10 weeks as a “waiting” period before a casino decision is announced.

The county’s 32-page submittal makes the following comments or observations:

- The final casino study overestimates how much gambling revenue would be generated and underestimates the potential need for housing and social services for casino workers earning “wages near poverty level.” It also “masks the practical necessity” for low-wage workers to move to Clark County to avoid commuting costs, which in turn could create a ripple effect for schools and social services that has not been adequately examined.

- The study fails to adequately analyze the transportation effects of the casino project. Study consultants chose to use examples from California that do not reflect Northwest conditions.
- The study is “seriously deficient” in assessing what effect the Cowlitz casino would have on nearby La Center, which receives more than 60 percent of its tax revenue from four nontribal cardrooms. Even if the tribe provides compensation for lost gambling taxes, it won’t be able to compensate for the loss of business.

San Pasqual tribe could expel members

By Edward Sifuentes
North County Times

ESCONDIDO, Calif. — San Pasqual tribal member Ron Mast is challenging the enrollment of about 80 people in his tribe. (Photo by Edward Sifuentes - staff photographer)

About 80 members of the San Pasqual Band of Mission Indians, which owns Valley View Casino, will be expelled from the Valley Center tribe if an internal effort to “disenroll” them is successful.

It is the latest in a long-standing, bitter feud among factions of the 300-member tribe that calls into question what it means to be American Indian and who gets to benefit from the spoils of casino wealth.

A week ago, members of the tribe held separate meetings on the disenrollment matter. One was held at the reservation and another at the Knights of Columbus Hall in Escondido.

The group that met at San Pasqual voted to accept a consultant’s report that concluded the 80 people whose tribal affiliations are in question do not belong and should not be listed as members of San Pasqual.

The other group contends that some of the information in the report is “unsubstantiated.”

Ron Mast, a member of the San Pasqual tribe, filed a challenge in August saying the group does not belong in the tribe. He says the group is made up of descendants of Marcus R. Alto Sr., whom he contends

was adopted by his aunt and uncle, Maria Duro Alto and Jose Alto, as a child, but was not their biological son.

“They are not my family,” Mast said in a recent interview. “They have no blood of the band.”

Ray Alto, one of the descendants of Marcus R. Alto Sr., declined to comment.

The term “blood of the band” refers to kinship among tribal members. It was a method of describing an individual’s Indian heritage by U.S. census takers, beginning in the mid-1800s.

San Pasqual’s constitution requires that people have at least one-eighth blood of the band to belong.

Mast says that because Marcus R. Alto Sr. was adopted, he does not meet the requirement and neither do his descendants. In his challenge, he submitted Alto’s baptismal certificate as evidence. In it, Alto’s mother is listed as Benedita Barrios, a non-tribal member.

In recent years, questions of who legitimately belongs have plagued tribes across the country, including several local tribes.

In 2006, the Pechanga Band of Mission Indians, which owns a large hotel and casino complex near Temecula, voted to disenroll 130 members of the tribe.

Factions within the Rincon Band of Mission Indians, which also own a casino in Valley Center, led a failed attempt to

oust its former chairman, John Currier, and about 70 members of his extended family.

There are no precise statistics, but there are similar disputes across the state and the country involving thousands of tribal members whose heritage has come in to question, especially among tribes that own some of the largest and most profitable casinos.

There are about 50,000 people officially enrolled in California’s 108 federally recognized tribes. But before tribes began building their casinos, most reservations were desolate, isolated places, with high unemployment, poverty and other social ills.

Many members began returning to their reservations when casinos began producing jobs, rekindling old bloodline feuds.

In 2007, the Indian gambling industry took in about \$26 billion, up from \$24.9 billion in 2006, according to the National Indian Gaming Commission, which oversees the tribal casinos. California’s tribal gambling industry has grown into one of the largest in the world, generating an estimated \$7.7 billion a year.

The hundreds of people across the state who have lost their memberships in the tribes also have lost their share of the casino pie.

In Pechanga, those who were removed from tribal rolls are ineligible for monthly payments reported to be about

\$20,000.

In San Pasqual, about 50 of the people whose membership is in question also lost their jobs at the tribe’s casino. Their casino payments were suspended, according to a letter dated July 7 from the tribe’s enrollment committee to the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The amount of the payments are not officially disclosed, but are said to be about \$4,000 a month.

“The suspended payments are being held in escrow accounts until these matters have been finally resolved,” according to the letter signed by three members of the tribe’s five-member enrollment committee.

The two members of the enrollment committee who did not sign the letter, Joe Navarro and Robert Phelps, wrote a separate letter to the bureau questioning the authenticity of Alto’s baptismal certificate because the names don’t match.

The child’s name on the certificate is listed as Roberto Marco Alto, according to the letter signed by the two members of the enrollment committee.

“There is no record that Marcus Alto Sr. ever used the name Roberto Marco, and we therefore cannot determine if Marcus Alto Sr. and the child listed in the baptismal record is the same individual,” according to the letter.

Under the San Pasqual tribe’s constitution, the bureau

must review the evidence and make a final ruling on membership matters, said Jim Fletcher, superintendent of the agency’s Southern California office.

Fletcher said he reported the tribe’s actions to the National Indian Gaming Commission because it may have violated federal rules by suspending the payments before the members were officially removed.

“They are considered members until the bureau completes the review process,” Fletcher said in a phone interview Wednesday.

Many other tribes, such as Pechanga, decide such matters themselves.

Members of San Pasqual’s enrollment committee appear to disagree with Fletcher over who has authority to expel people from the tribe.

“Under federal law, the tribe has inherent sovereign authority to govern membership in accordance with the enrollment criteria and procedures provided for in its constitution and by laws,” according to the letter.

San Pasqual Chairman Allen Lawson declined to comment.

Pushed to the rocks At San Pasqual, the question of who belongs is nearly as old as the tribe.

The tribe’s members are descendants of the original inhabitants of the San Pasqual Valley, east of Escondido. The ancestors of the San Pasqual were removed from the valley in the 1870s, when non-Indians staked claims on the land.

Tribe refuses to bargain

By Heather Allen
New London Day

NEW LONDON, Conn. — The battle between the Mashantucket Pequot Tribe and the United Auto Workers union is one step closer to the U.S. Court of Appeals.

The National Labor Relations Board in Hartford issued a complaint on Friday, affirming the UAW’s unfair labor practice claim, which was filed after the tribe refused to bargain with the group on behalf of poker and table game dealers at Foxwoods Resort Casino.

While the complaint is seen by all parties involved as a formality, it does bring the tribe one step closer to having the U.S. Court of Appeals review its case.

“This is just sort of a procedure to allow the employer to take the matter to the courts,” said John Cotter, assistant regional director for the NLRB in Hartford. “Everyone knows where we’re headed.”

Once before the court, the tribe will argue, as it has throughout the process, that the NLRB did not have the jurisdiction to administer last year’s union election among dealers, because of the tribe’s sovereign immunity.

The tribe’s attorneys have until August 1 to file a response to the NLRB’s complaint.

Once that is filed, the case will be sent once again to NLRB headquarters in D.C., where the board will most likely order casino management to bargain with the UAW.

In honor of...



Associated Press

Dave LaSarte-Meeks, chief executive officer at the Coeur d’Alene Casino Resort Hotel, left, and Tribal Chairman Chief Allan, unveil a monument at a ceremony Friday, in Worley, Idaho, in honor of Ernie Stensgar who served as the Coeur d’Alene Tribe chairman for 18 years.

‘Comanche Boy’ brings fan support to ring

By Robert Przybylo
Oklahoman

OKLAHOMA CITY — By day, Lawton’s George Tahdooahnippah tries to protect the environment. Working as an environmentalist for his Comanche tribe, he said he’s a certified tree-hugger.

By night, it’s his opponents who need protection. The 29-year-old super middleweight enters tonight with a 12-0-1 record with 11 wins coming by knockout.

Tahdooahnippah, the “Comanche Boy,” highlights tonight’s main event at Remington Park presented by CatBOX Entertainment.

He’s taken the road less traveled to reach this point,

but he wouldn’t change a thing.

A standout wrestler at Lawton Eisenhower, Tahdooahnippah attended the University of Delaware. In his second year there, he started to feel homesick.

And that’s when he found his calling. Tahdooahnippah, with a background in kickboxing, took a stab at a Toughman Contest. He reached the finals, and suddenly, the wrestler was turned into a boxer.

“I’ve always had the speed and the movement, so it wasn’t that tough a transition,” Tahdooahnippah said. “My grandfather used to participate in Golden Gloves tournaments, so fighting runs in the family.”

And with huge support

from the Comanche tribe, Tahdooahnippah brings to each fight a distinct fan advantage.

It starts with the entrance.

A drum beats, native dancers walk out, and Tahdooahnippah enters the ring to rap from more native people.

“I like to utilize everyone,” he said. “It’s important to get the crowd on your side and bring that energy.”

Tahdooahnippah does his part, too. After each KO, he does his own victory dance.

But with two boys, Nacona, 4, and George Jr., 1, and a fiancé, Mia, Tahdooahnippah knows it’s time to step up the competition.

When training for a fight, Tahdooahnippah wakes up at 6 a.m. to go on a morning run. From there, he goes to his environmentalist job. After work, it’s to the gym for more training.

So far, it’s been working. Tahdooahnippah fought at Remington in April, winning via first-round knockout and is 3-0-1 this year.

With little amateur experience, each fight presents something new for Tahdooahnippah.

“I’m still learning the game and all the little nuances that come with it,” he said. “But I’m very dedicated and really want to represent my people well.”

Tahdooahnippah trains in a tiny gym in Elgin. He said he hopes his success spurs

others into joining the sport and into giving back to the community.

Success in Lawton is nothing new. Grady Brewer won The Contender Tournament two years ago and grew up with Tahdooahnippah.

“It’s great to have someone like Grady for kids to look up to,” Tahdooahnippah said. “We want to show the kids that they can become something.”

All of Tahdooahnippah’s knockouts have occurred within the first three rounds. He’s only fought 23 rounds in 13 fights.

“I’m a crowd-pleaser,” he said. “I’m looking to get him out of there as soon as possible. That’s what the people come to see.”