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NEWS

Residents criticize plan to expand

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SOBOBA: Supporters say new casino good for jobs, Valley already affected by growth and crime.

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Seldom was heard an encouraging word about the concept of moving Soboba Casino off the reservation during a nearly four-hour meeting at the Hemet Public Library on Wednesday.

Most of the about 125 people who showed up to discuss the draft environmental impact statement prepared by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs on the proposed annexation of 535 acres of land to the reservation were there to damn the idea, not to praise it.

In addition to disparaging the idea of moving the casino to the land, which lies along both sides of Lake Park Drive at the intersection with Soboba Road on what is now a golf course, country club, and vacant land, several speakers tore into the draft environmental statement itself, calling it incomplete and riddled with errors.

First to the podium was San Jacinto Mayor Dale Stubblefield, who announced to the crowd that the City Council had voted earlier in the day to oppose the transfer of the property from the city to the reservation.

The only dissenting vote was cast by Steve Di Memmo, said Stubblefield.

Stubblefield, like a number of other speakers, said he has no objections to expansion of the casino or to plans to build a casino-hotel-entertainment complex with retail centers.

His only objection, he said, is to the concept of putting the casino on what is now tax-producing land adjacent to what are now quiet neighborhoods, two of them mobile home parks whose occupants are primarily seniors.

The environmental statement dealt briefly with the idea of relocating the casino to land adjacent to the existing casino, which is on tribal land, saying it would have to go in a floodplain on land owned by individual members and not the tribe, and that much of the reservation is too steep and rocky to build anything.

Critics of those concepts say the land outside the reservation is in the same floodplain and that the tribe found a way to build a 400-acre sports and recreation complex on the reservation and that it should be possible to build a casino complex as well.

The frequency of violent crime on the reservation is also a city concern, Stubblefield said, since there is reason to believe it would follow the casino to the new location.

Tribal officials reacted to shootings on the reservation by prohibiting emergency personnel without permission, he said, a situation that could be repeated if the casino is moved into what is now the city.

If the property is annexed to the reservation in what is called a fee-to-trust action, it would become part of what is essentially a sovereign nation under several court decisions.

The leaders of that sovereign nation — the Soboba Band of Luiseño Indians — would not be required to provide any greater cooperation at the new location than at the old, Stubblefield said.

In fact, the sovereignty of the reservation was an issue for several other speakers, all residents of the neighborhoods adjacent to the proposed casino site.

Several speakers said they are concerned that the time could come when they would be denied routes into and out of their neighborhoods because the existing roads are on tribal land.

Marcella Thompson said that, given a history of antipathy toward police and fire vehicles on reservation roads, she is

concerned that it may not be possible to get a response to an emergency along roads on tribal land.

“What if you call 911 and they are not able to get there?” she asked.

Vinay Rao, resident of a tract just west of the proposed casino site, said he is concerned about another form of travel restriction, that which could result from being trapped by traffic on the only two roads leading to the site.

Already, traffic backs up when the tribe hosts entertainment at its outdoor arena beside the existing casino, he said, and there is every reason to believe it would get worse with the bigger complex envisioned in the plan.

Rao said he does not believe the environmental statement begins to correctly assess the traffic impact, telling the BIA representatives who were at the meeting: “The traffic study is amateurish at best and disingenuous at worst.”

Jerry Uecker, a resident of one of the mobile home parks and an opponent of the fee-to-trust transfer from the start, said he and members of an organization he helped establish and in which he is a leader, Save Our Community, does not oppose either the existing casino or plans to expand it.

“We are not opposed to gaming or to the Sobobas improving their lot,” he said.

Their only objection is to moving the casino to what is now a quiet residential area.

Wynn Hornburg — who said he was speaking for the ownership of Soboba Springs Mobile Estates, one of the mobile home parks — told the hearing that 80 percent of those living in the community would be within 80 feet of the casino if it is moved to the site.

He was among the critics of the environmental study. “I don’t think the report even begins to discuss the issues.”

But not all of the comments were negative.

Hemet resident Ramon Fonseca said he understands residents’ concern about the impact of the relocated casino, but that growth and improvement often bring pain.

The streets of the Hemet he grew up in and his lived in for 40 years has become congested with vehicles brought to town by growth, he said.

As for those who object to building the casino in a floodplain, he said, “All those homes shouldn’t really be there, but they are,” referring to the same dwellings many of the those protesting the plan live in, many of which are in the floodplain.

“I think they should be allowed to better themselves,” he said of the tribal members.

Lois Duran said she is a resident of Soboba Springs Mobile Estates, but supports the casino plan.

“I’m absolutely shocked at some of the things I’ve heard tonight,” she said of some of the comments from those opposing it.

Crime rates in San Jacinto and Hemet are already high, she contended, and the casino would not add to them in any material way.

Besides, she said the expanded operation would bring jobs to the community.

Joyce Hernandez, who said she is new to the Valley, but her husband has lived here 41 years, cited her experience at another casino, which she declined to identify, and the multiple community agencies and projects that have received substantial support from that operation.

Make-a-Wish gets all the coins tossed into the fountains in front of the casino and checks as large as $1 million have been written to charities, she said.

About a dozen tribal members attended the meeting, though no one from Soboba spoke.

Vern Lauritzen, chief of staff to Riverside County Supervisor Jeff Stone, was among those who doubted that the environmental report addressed the issues arising from the annexation plan, chief among them public safety.

“The supervisor has never been opposed to expansion or casino construction,” he said, but mitigation is inadequate.

Hal Retzlaff, who lives in a mobile home adjacent to the casino site, said he summed up the feelings of his neighbors. “We do not want or need a Las Vegas-style casino across from our neighborhood. There is room on the existing reservation.”

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