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Supervisors want to work with Soboba tribe on development plans

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The Press-Enterprise

Riverside County officials on Tuesday described the draft environmental study for the Soboba tribe's proposed reservation expansion and hotel-casino project as deficient in addressing potential negative impacts, but county supervisors suggested that dialog with the tribe and compromise may resolve concerns.

By a 4-0 vote, the Board of Supervisors expressed opposition to the project in its present form and concerns about lack of detail in addressing issues including traffic management, public safety services and environmental factors.

Board Chairman Jeff Stone, who represents the 3rd District that includes the area near San Jacinto, appointed himself and 5th District Supervisor Marion Ashley to a subcommittee to "work cooperatively, professionally" with the tribe.

Tuesday was the deadline for written comments on the plans to be submitted to the Bureau of Indian Affairs' regional director in Sacramento. A final environmental impact statement is not expected until next year.

The U.S. Department of the Interior's assistant secretary of Indian affairs makes the final decision about the land acquisition.

The Soboba Band of Luiseño Indians operates a casino on the reservation about a mile from the proposed development. The tribe wants to annex land it owns along Soboba Road near Lake Park Drive into federal "fee to trust" status, adding to the more than 6,000-acre reservation. In a trust, the land is held by the U.S. government on behalf of the tribe, which would control its use.

Noting that the decision is a federal issue, county Supervisor John Tavaglione suggested local governments and the tribe need to work together to lessen any negative effects of the project.

While acknowledging the tribe's "good neighbor" status because it financially supports causes in the community, Stone said the effects on traffic and public safety must be addressed in "government to government" discussions.

A tribal spokesman did not directly address the offer to meet. In a statement, spokesman Mike Hiles said, "The Tribe is following a set process as mandated by the Federal Government, and appreciates all those who have provided input during this public comment phase."

If the annexation goes through, residents of Soboba Springs Mobile Estates, a housing development adjacent to the Country Club at Soboba's golf course and a hillside neighborhood, would have to travel through the reservation to get to their homes in the city of San Jacinto.

At meetings and hearings, some residents have protested the tribe's plans as incompatible with neighborhoods. Other speakers have said the development would provide a much-needed economic boast.

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