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Gioia seeks advisory vote on urban casinos

By Tom Lochner
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RICHMOND - Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia on Monday called for an advisory vote to settle once and for all whether or not San Pablo and other West County residents want urban casinos.

Gioia's announcement coincided with the unveiling of a study funded by Bay Area cardrooms indicating about three-quarters of voters in the East Bay and a majority in San Pablo oppose the expansion of gambling for fear of its social, economic and environmental costs.

The Tarrance Group, a nationwide political polling and consulting firm, queried about 240 San Pablo residents and another 250 in the Interstate 80 corridor. It is the latest in a years-long train of dueling studies confirming that casino gambling is very good or very bad for the area, depending on the sponsor.

Casino San Pablo, owned by the Lytton Band of Pomo Indians, currently offers electronic bingo, a Class II form of gambling under federal rules that does not require state approval. The tribe hopes someday to operate Class III, Las Vegas-style slot machines, which require state approval. But the Legislature so far has balked at ratifying a 2004 deal between the tribe and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger for 2,500 Class III machines.

The casino added 86 bingo machines last month, bringing the total to 590.

Two other tribes want to build casinos in West County, one in North Richmond, the other at Richmond's Point Molate.

The cardrooms -- Artichoke Joe's of San Bruno, California Grand of Pacheco and The Oaks of Emeryville -- feel challenged by an expanded Casino San Pablo and other potential casinos.

San Pablo's City Council and administration strongly support Casino San Pablo. The city expects to collect about \$8 million this fiscal year from the casino -- \$1.5 million in lieu of property taxes and \$6.5 as a share of gaming revenue -- said City Manager Brock Arner. The total represents more than half of the city's approximately \$13.5 million general fund budget this year.

Doug Elmets, a spokesman for the tribe, said "the so-called study" unveiled Monday is not credible because it is "sponsored by card clubs with an economic interest in burying the tribe.

"It fails to recognize the city of San Pablo would be bankrupt without Casino San Pablo," Elmets said. The casino hires hundreds of people and spends thousands on philanthropy, Elmets added, challenging the cardrooms to do likewise.

The choice of venue for Monday's announcement, the plaza in front of the county Superior Court building, was symbolic.

"You're going to see more business here at the courthouse and the (county) health center behind us as a result of the expansion of urban gaming," Gioia said. Other speakers, including a county social worker and a Richmond mother, warned about gambling addiction, bankruptcy, divorce and crime.

Richmond Councilwoman Gayle McLaughlin said she was appalled that her council favors a casino at Point Molate, "the jewel of the East Bay," and warned that casinos transfer money "from the have-nots to the haves." Activist Andres Soto warned against the East Bay becoming "ground zero for urban gaming."

Gioia said an advisory vote, which he envisions for some time next year, would be "a direct expression of public sentiment to influence state and federal decision-makers."