



Posted on Sun, Jan. 23, 2005

Locals vocal on casino expansion

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CONTRA COSTA TIMES

SAN PABLO - Friends and foes of a controversial plan to transform a cardroom here into an Indian gaming hall aired their views at a standing-room-only gathering Saturday.

Billed as a town hall meeting on urban casinos in general, the lively, five-hour event focused squarely on the Lytton Band of Pomo Indians' proposal to turn Casino San Pablo into a much larger operation, complete with 2,500 slot machines.

Organized by Assemblywoman Loni Hancock, D-Berkeley, Saturday's meeting was the largest and most formal public forum so far in the city that stands to reap most of the promised rewards and bear most of the threatened burdens, if the casino grows. Hancock opposes the expansion.

Both sides in the debate turned up in force, cramming a 450-seat theater at Contra Costa College in San Pablo and spilling into the venue's lobby. Many casino opponents sported "ban the casino" stickers, while proponents donned yellow T-shirts in support of the Lytton Band.

Local government officials and area residents fighting the casino said the expansion would lead to a host of problems, including traffic jams on Interstate 80 and San Pablo Dam Road. They also said more gambling opportunities would increase crime and personal debt in the community.

"It destroys lives," said retired pastor Chuck Day, of First Baptist Church of San Pablo. "It promotes all kinds of social ills."

San Pablo resident Dean Marshall, a sales representative for an advertising company that markets to San Pablo businesses, disputed casino backers' assertion that the expansion will bring new customers to the city's small businesses. None of his clients has reported that the existing casino does that, he said.

Another San Pablo resident, Michael May, said he was not opposed to the casino in general but objects to a casino expansion so large that it does not fit into the suburban city.

"My biggest problem is the scale -- 2,500 slots is just way out of scale," May said. "If it's 2,500 or nothing, then I think it should be nothing."

Lytton officials plan within a month to unveil a scaled-down plan, lacking either a hotel or

high-rise building. The new design still will have 2,500 slot machines but should address other public concerns, Lytton chairwoman Margie Mejia said Saturday.

"We think it will be something that will embrace the community," Mejia told a reporter outside the town hall meeting.

While emphasizing that casino backers are listening closely to community concerns, Mejia said there are many misconceptions about the casino plan and how it might harm East Bay communities. "I think there's a lot of fear that's been spread out there that isn't factual."

Edith Hayes, a seamstress at Cache Creek Casino Resort, an operation of the Rumsey Band of Wintun Indians in Brooks, a rural Yolo County community, urged casino expansion opponents to consider the facts of her story.

Hayes said she was earning a meager income as a farmer before she took an \$11 per hour job, with benefits, at the casino.

"I implore you to look further than what might be. Look to the casino at Cache Creek for what is."

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