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Readers' Forum: County will benefit from casino deal

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Article Text:

I GREW up in Richmond and am raising my family here. I understand how three casinos could change the character of our community in ways many of us don't want. That's why it wasn't easy for me to take another hard look at the proposed Point Molate casino in Richmond and reassess how I think Contra Costa County should prepare for this possible development.

In addition to Casino San Pablo, which is already designated tribal land for the Lytton Band of Pomo Indians, the Guidiville Band of Pomos seeks approval from the federal government for Indian land at Point Molate and the Scott's Valley Band of Pomos are seeking tribal land in North Richmond. Receiving such approval would allow the tribes to build a casino.

To get federal approval, the tribes must prove they have a connection to the area. The U.S. Department of Interior makes this determination. The county has no approval authority whatsoever. Local agencies can weigh in, but approval rests solely with the federal government.

The city of San Pablo supported Casino San Pablo, and the Richmond City Council approved a contract to sell Point Molate land to the Guidiville tribe. The Obama administration has told tribal leaders it wants to make transferring lands to Indian tribes less onerous and time-consuming.

Contra Costa County has been the primary public agency opposing these casino projects, and I've been a leader of this opposition. Now that the projects are moving forward, with a chance of approval, I'm committed to protecting local communities from impacts on traffic, public safety, health and social services. I'm also determined to ensure that local residents are first in line for economic benefits including jobs.

This doesn't mean I support urban gaming. It means that I don't want the county to be left out in the cold if the projects are approved, and not receive help from the tribes to mitigate community impacts.


This week, after much examination, the Board of Supervisors approved an agreement with the Guidiville Band of Pomos under which the county will get substantially more revenue and jobs than if we had opposed the Point Molate proposal to the bitter end.

The Point Molate agreement provides funding for traffic improvements and a guaranteed \$12 million annually, which will more than cover public safety, and health and social service impacts plus revenue for violence prevention, job training and other pressing needs.

This amount can be renegotiated if impacts are greater than projected, and adjusted for inflation. The county estimates that it would get only \$6 million to \$7 million through arbitration if it opposed the project and it was approved.

The agreement also guarantees that 70 percent of the project's estimated 4,500 jobs are reserved for county residents, with 40 percent going to Richmond residents. Additionally, 1,000 construction jobs over three years will go to local workers.

The city of Richmond, through its agreement with the tribe, is guaranteed \$17 million-\$20 million in annual revenues from the project and has required "green" construction and that all of the shoreline be public open space.

All of these mitigations are incredibly important if the Point Molate project is approved  especially in today's economy.

While it does feel a little like being between a rock and a hard place in an uncertain future, I believe the board's decision is in the best interests of county residents. If the project is approved, we are guaranteed local jobs and revenue to address impacts and provide community benefit. Without the agreement, there are no guarantees.

Gioia is a member of the Contra Costa Board of Supervisor and a resident of Richmond.

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