

Tribe's hopes for huge Madera casino hinge on ballot battle

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For as long as anyone in Madera County can remember, the impoverished North Fork Tribe of Mono Indians has been scattered in trailers and apartments throughout a rugged mix of Sierra foothills and San Joaquin Valley flats, with no reservation to call its own. Decimated by settlers and soldiers in the late 1800s, the North Fork was disbanded by federal officials before being restored to tribal status in 1983 - but still with no land.

Now, tribal leaders say, the time has come to sweep away the tortured history and grab what Indians call "the new buffalo": gambling.

The tribe plans to build a huge casino on the outskirts of the city of Madera, on busy Highway 99, and analysts say it will bank millions of dollars almost immediately.

There's just one challenge to overcome: The state's voters have to approve Proposition 48 on the Nov. 4 ballot. If they don't, the compact that Gov. Jerry Brown signed with the tribe two years ago to allow the casino to be built will be canceled.

The measure was initiated by two local competing gaming tribes and antigambling activists who want the casino plan scrapped. They contend it would set a bad precedent for the entire state - leading to gleaming gaming palaces sprouting up next to big cities and tourist areas.

That's because the North Fork Tribe got its casino land alongside Madera, a 61,000-resident blink on the highway, by "reservation shopping," the critics say.

The land is 38 miles from the closest thing the Mono band had to its own property, a series of mountainous plots owned by tribal members in the village of North Fork. Casino opponents say that when federal officials allowed the land near Madera to be deeded to the tribe in 2012, they overreached.

Far from home

The precedent of being able to designate any land anywhere as tribal is catastrophic, casino opponents say. Virtually all of the state was once Indian land, they note, and historical accountings and claims can be adjusted willy-nilly to suit any request.

The tribe says that is nonsense. Their ancestors hunted and lived all through what is now Madera County, they say, and to accuse them of snatching that land a century after their culture was crushed is a taunting injustice.

They've managed to better their tribal lot a bit in recent years with federal Indian grants allowing them to build a community center and housing for some members - but North Fork leaders believe their big chance for resurgence is now. They say the casino will lift up everything nearby with new jobs and businesses, and that anybody trying to stop them is shortsighted, wrongheaded or greedy.

"We absolutely have a legitimate claim to that land because that's where our people were, historically," said Maryann McGovran, vice chairwoman of the 1,987-member tribe. "There is no doubt of that. Our trade routes went all the way through the county to Monterey.

"And with this casino, we feel we're doing the right thing for the county and for our community. Everyone will benefit, but now we are just getting caught up in red tape. It's frustrating. We just want to do a good thing."

The casino, she said, would create 4,000 jobs during its construction phase and then 1,600 permanent jobs once it's open. That's a much-needed employment blast for a county that has a 12 percent unemployment rate, and where 33 percent of residents live below the poverty line.

Under its signed agreements for the project, the tribe would also dish out as much as \$20 million to the county and \$11 million right away to the city of Madera, build a fire station, and give nearly \$1 million to local education and community development projects. After that, the tribe would contribute \$10 million a year to state and local governments.

That all will amount to a few drops in the casino's money bucket, if it fills as expected with \$225 million a year in revenue.