

# Chukchansi members recognize tribal governing body

By Carmen George

At a meeting held in Fresno the weekend of Jan. 24, members of the Picayune Rancheria of Chukchansi Indians were voting on several issues related to the closed Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino. Members of the so-called "unification council," led by Reggie Lewis and Nancy Ayala, were on the stage trying to address the audience. Some audience members questioned their right to lead voting. Others tried to bring up other issues, critics from within the tribe said. Things became agitated during a vote on whether to pay \$1,000 to people who came to Fresno from across the state to vote as members of the general council. [Related story](#) MICK DONALD

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Chukchansi tribal members Saturday voted to recognize a governing body of the Picayune Rancheria of Chukchansi Indians until a tribal council election can be held.



The vote taken during a meeting at the Golden Palace banquet hall in Fresno is being viewed by many as a crucial step toward reopening Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino in Coarsegold, which was shut down the day after an Oct. 9 raid of casino offices by a tribal group led by Tex McDonald.



But Saturday's meeting didn't come without controversy.

Leaders from tribal councils previously led by Reggie Lewis and Nancy Ayala ran Saturday's meeting — representing just two of at least four leadership groups at odds.

And only members from the group that controlled the meeting were voted into what's now being called the new "unification council."

Microphones were turned off on speakers from opposing groups — including some who proposed that tribal members vote to hold a new election instead of voting to affirm a temporary tribal council.

A video posted to YouTube by a meeting attendee shows yelling and shoving among members as a person on the dais, apparently Ayala, speaks with a microphone.

People familiar with the meeting said afterward the scuffles arose from disagreements among members as to whether Ayala and Lewis had the authority to lead the meeting and call for votes.

The uproar depicted in the video apparently occurred early in the meeting during a vote to pay \$1,000 to people who came to Fresno from out of town to cast ballots as members of the general council.

Immediately after the meeting, officials said it was peaceful except for some pushing and shoving, and that Fresno police and security guards were posted inside the building to ensure peace was kept.

The meeting was pre-organized, with printed ballots ready for members to check one of two options: "yes" or "no" to affirming a temporary tribal council comprised of Chance Alberta, Nancy Ayala, Nokomis Hernandez, Tracey Hopkins (formerly Brechbuehl), Reggie Lewis and Karen Wynn.

Lewis said if all goes well, the earliest the casino might reopen is late spring.

Lewis didn't have the official vote count on Saturday afternoon, but he said more than 300 people voted to affirm the council and more than 200 voted against it. Lewis estimated that Saturday's meeting had an attendance of more than 550 people — said to be the largest turnout in the tribe's history for a general council meeting.

All attending members received a travel stipend check. Lewis didn't want to announce how much members were paid.

Lewis said he'd like to see a tribal council election held as soon as possible but that other leaders want to wait until May. That way, everyone interested in running for office would have enough time to attend at least eight tribal meetings, required by the tribe's laws to sit on the council.

According to the tribe's constitution there are two ways to pass Chukchansi law: By a vote of the tribal council, or a vote of the general council — tribal members — which can only happen if a quorum is reached, currently about 280 of the tribe's voting members.

For that reason, Dora Jones, a tribal leader who previously sat on a council led by Morris Reid, thought she was acting within the tribe's laws when she went on stage to urge members to vote for a "clean-slate" election, only to have her microphone turned off.

"It was a complete shamble," Jones said of the meeting and unification council vote. "They (leaders running the meeting) kept telling the members, 'A yes vote means you want to open the casino and a no vote means you don't want to open the casino.'"

Officials said the election was conducted by a neutral third-party election service company, True Ballot, but Jones said she saw one of the leaders who was voted into power collecting some ballots. That council denies the allegation.

Lewis said leaders were just trying to "follow the agenda" and "keep some sense of order" when they turned microphones off as some members tried to speak.

Lewis said there isn't a process in place for how the general council is supposed to pass resolutions. For that reason, he said some previous general council meetings turned into "chaos" when a number of people tried to run the show.

In a prepared statement, Lewis said of Saturday's vote: "This was a historic moment for our tribe in charting a path to reopen our casino, to restore order to our government, to provide services to our members and to silence any group attempting to sow confusion and discord."

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