

Gaming works

Coachella Valley tribes benefit local economy, show sensitivity to area concerns

By GREG PETTIS / Special To The Press-Enterprise

Lately, a group called the Coachella Valley Coalition for Responsible Sovereignty, which seemingly sprang up from nowhere, is out to save our valley from the evils of Indian gaming. It seeks to educate local officials and businesses that Indian tribes and their elected council members are not to be trusted, that the tribes have plans to lay waste to the desert and to destroy our lifestyle as we know it.

Representatives of this group arrive at city council meetings, Coachella Valley Association of Governments (CVAG) hearings and other public venues to tout their concerns and to attempt to compare valley Indians to those of East Coast states. They do this without attempting to find out the truth about the relationships between the tribes and their neighbors.

They invite people from Northern California and from other states to share their tales of fear and woe. They have also sponsored town hall meetings to talk of the congestion, air pollution and visual blight that tribal casinos cause, yet they fail to invite those with opposing opinions to speak.



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The bronze "Agua Caliente Women" marks the heart of downtown Palm Springs. The Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians has become a significant employer in the Coachella Valley.

Let's discuss facts. Five local tribes have casinos in the desert. Four of the five have written agreements with their host cities for various services provided by the city; i.e. police and fire protection, infrastructure and more. The fifth tribe has an active, ongoing dialogue with local governments to ensure that the tribe poses no hardship.

The tribal governments hold regular joint meetings with their elected counterparts in city government. These meetings that are held in the public eye and are open to the public.

Local tribes have appointed planning commissions that hold public meetings to discuss development plans, just like cities do.

Tribes now account for 37,200 jobs in California. Here in the Coachella Valley, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians has become the single largest employer of Cathedral City residents, surpassing the Palm Springs

Unified School District and the Desert Regional Medical Center.

Local tribes are taking the lead in environmental protection in the valley. One example is the Cabazon tribe creating and operating First Nation Recovery, a tire crumbling plant in Mecca. The Torres-Martinez Band, grappling with the results of decades of neglect by Riverside County, is removing sludge and debris from its ancestral lands. And the Agua Caliente tribe has purchased huge tracts of mountain land for bighorn sheep habitat and preservation.

Three valley tribes hold seats on CVAG and participate in debates on land use, transportation, public safety, animal control and many other valley issues. The Southern California Association of Governments is currently talking to the tribes about participating fully in discussions on these same issues.

The time has arrived that those in business and local government stand up and tell the truth about tribal gaming and local tribes - gaming works for the valley. Gaming brings jobs. Gaming brings economic development. Gaming brings needed housing. Gaming brings growth.

All of those things can be bad, but in our case, in the evidence we have seen, the tribes here in the desert do it right. The tribes here spend the time necessary to do the studies, to listen to their neighbors and to be responsible. The tribes in the Coachella Valley care.

Over the next few weeks and months, local business owners, managers, workers, residents and elected leaders will be invited to participate in public forums and discussions where everyone is invited to join in. Let's clear the air and have a real dialogue. Together, with a shared vision, we will continue to build our communities.

Greg Pettis is the mayor pro tem of Cathedral City.