

Area officials, tribes celebrate pact

CASINO IMPACT: The agreement will bring millions of dollars to

By MIKE KATAOKA / The Press-Enterprise

RIVERSIDE - Inland tribal leaders and government officials Thursday celebrated their cooperative spirit that will send millions of gaming dollars back to communities impacted by Indian casinos.

The lunch at the Riverside County Administrative Center commemorated the passage of state legislation that will pay for public works and public safety projects near casinos starting early next year.

Riverside County stands to receive about \$10.5 million the first year and San Bernardino County \$1.5 million from \$25 million distributed statewide.



State Sen. Jim Battin, R-La Quinta, carried the legislation, Senate Bill 621, but he credited the Tribal Alliance of Sovereign Indian Nations, made up mostly of Inland-area gaming tribes, for its smooth passage.

"It wasn't nearly as tough a road as I thought it would be and that was because of TASIN," Battin told the gathering.

The alliance supported the legislation as the vehicle for keeping tribal promises to ease the impacts of their casinos on surrounding neighborhoods, he said.

Paul Alvarez / The Press-Enterprise

Lynn Valbuena, chairwoman of the Tribal Alliance of Sovereign Indian Nations, speaks during the luncheon celebration Thursday.

Lynn Valbuena, the alliance chairwoman and a leader of the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians in San Bernardino County, said tribes have contributed tens of millions of dollars to

offset impacts but there was no process to distribute the money.

Battin's bill establishes the process through the Indian Gaming Special Distribution Fund, signed by then-Gov. Gray Davis in October after unanimous approval in the Legislature.

Of the state's 50 tribes that run casinos, only 28 pay into the state fund that was established under a compact three years ago.

Those 28 tribes had slot machines before voters in March 2000 approved Las Vegas-style gambling on reservations. Indian casinos that opened since the initiative passed do not pay into the distribution fund.

San Manuel, Valbuena said, already has paid for a traffic signal and crossing guards in the neighborhood near the casino and the special fund will provide more benefits.

"We have a good working relationship with the community," she said.

Under Battin's bill, each county will establish a committee to decide how the funds are distributed. Local government and tribal interests will be represented on Riverside County's seven-member panel.

John Tavaglione, chairman of the Riverside County Board of Supervisors, said at the lunch that tribal and government leaders have opened lines of communication as a model for other counties in California.

"It is setting the stage for the Inland Empire, once again, to show how things are done right," he said.

With much of the state's Indian gaming centered in Riverside County, the projected \$10.5million allocation is the largest among 25 counties participating in the fund.