Editorial

One good measure, one bad

Indian gaming benefits California tribes

February 9, 2000

The future of Indian casinos in California depends on Proposition 1A on the March 7 ballot. If it passes, tribal gambling will continue, with expansion likely on the reservations themselves.

If it fails, the casinos, which support the livelihoods of thousands of California Indians and keep them out of poverty, will have no legal basis for operation and could be shut down.

Whether or not they gamble, Californians should recognize the benefits that Indian gaming has brought to the tribes themselves. In San Diego County, tribal members once lived in dire poverty. They were pushed onto their current reservations during the last century, with no means to support themselves. They were plagued by poverty, poor health, inadequate housing, lack of education and many other problems. It was only the advent of casinos in the last few years that brought them financial success. If not for gaming, tribal lands would still be the most impoverished places in the state.

Today, if you drive through a reservation that operates a casino, you'll see new houses with new cars in the driveways, new schools and other tribal facilities.

Unemployment has dropped precipitously and welfare has been all but eliminated. Indian gaming is an unrivaled success story.

Under the compacts, or agreements, with the state that Proposition 1A would ratify, gaming tribes will share the wealth with nongaming tribes. Not only that, but tribal casinos will pay license fees to state government totaling at least tens of millions of dollars. Indian casinos have generated an estimated $4 billion in economic activity in California, and that includes a lot of money that goes to non-Indian businesses, such as all the vendors selling supplies to casinos, ranging from carpeting to food. While Indians living and working on reservations are exempt from certain taxes, they do pay sales taxes for everything they buy off the reservations. In these and other ways, Indian casinos share the wealth with Indians and other Californians.

Voters who overwhelmingly supported Proposition 5 in November 1998 believed they were finally clearing the obstacles to Indian gaming. However, Proposition 5 was ruled unconstitutional last August. Proposition 1A is a constitutional amendment that will protect, once and for all, Indian gaming. Californians should vote Yes on Proposition 1A.

At the same time, voters should turn down a rival Indian gaming measure, Proposition 29. The measure ratifies a small number of gambling compacts with the state that were forced on the tribes two years ago. Most tribes refused these restrictive compacts, and risked closure of their casinos. However, when Gov. Gray Davis took office, he negotiated new, more equitable compacts, and those are the subject of Proposition 1A.

Proposition 29 would take effect only if it passes and Proposition 1A fails. Rather than accept restrictive and potentially unworkable compacts, California's Indian tribes would be better off going back to the drawing board. The overwhelming majority of tribes oppose Proposition 29. Californians should vote No on Proposition 29.

Copyright 2000 Union-Tribune Publishing Co.