Prop. 1A: Yes to Indian casinos

A Press-Enterprise editorial

Voters probably thought they had settled the issue about whether Indians could run casinos on tribal lands a year and a half ago, but, thanks to the State Supreme Court, they are getting a chance for reconsideration on the March 7 ballot.

In front of them are Propositions 1A and 29, which should at long last finally bring to a close the long, convoluted history of the Indians’ effort to stage Las Vegas-style gambling in California. The two measures, however, should not be dismissed as housekeeping.

Prop. 1A amends the State Constitution to correct a defect in 1998’s Prop. 5 that allowed Indians to run games against the house, such as slot machines or blackjack. If approved, Californians can expect a wide expansion in gaming on Indian lands, even beyond what they might have expected in 1998.

To begin with, the number of slot machines will increase dramatically -- some say five-fold. Nevada gaming interests -- the Indians’ villains in the 1998 campaign -- are likely to become partners with the tribes in new casinos and resorts.

For those reasons, there’s a lot not to like about this proposition -- the lack of independent oversight of the gaming and the absence of taxes to local governments that will have to wrestle with the problems casinos generate. But Californians’ attitudes toward gambling -- once limited to horse racing and low-ball card-rooms -- have been changing. Californians have become more comfortable with gambling through state-run lottery games and now Indian casinos.

Indians have been running video slot machines for years, and they are extremely lucrative. The money has unquestionably led to an improvement of life on reservations, if not a complete turnaround from the poverty that once was ubiquitous there. And, Prop. 1A would share revenues with tribes not fortunate enough to have lands close enough to urban areas to run successful gambling enterprises.

The state and federal governments have fumbled regulation of this matter for over a decade to the point that gambling -- more precisely gambling revenues -- has become part of a way of life. To take them away now would be akin to killing off the buffalo again.

The gambling agreements proposed in Prop. 1A and passed by the Legislature should be approved, while the agreements in Prop. 29 that were negotiated with (some would say forced on) the Indians in the waning days of the Wilson administration should be rejected. Most tribes don’t support them, and they don’t represent a consensus. Prop. 1A is closer to that consensus.

We recommend a Yes vote on Prop. 1A and a No vote on 29.