

Threat of casino in Petaluma postponed until 2032

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 05 May 2021 09:24 -

The prospect of a sprawling casino campus on Petaluma's south side, a looming threat since the Dry Creek Band of Pomo Indians bought a 277-acre plot between Highway 101 and the Petaluma River, will remain unrealized for at least the next decade.

As part of an extension to the tribe's 2008 agreement with Sonoma County, a prohibition of casino development near Petaluma's Kastania Road will linger until at least the end of 2032.

The tribe, cash-strapped after agreeing to close its Geyserville casino for 2.5 months at the start of the pandemic, also secured an agreement from the county to waive its \$750,000 annual payment for 2020 and 2021.

The Board of Supervisors approved the extension late last month, pushing the end of the agreement to Dec. 31, 2032, and marking the third time the two sides have agreed to add years to their memorandum of understanding.

A phone message left with the Dry Creek Band of Pomo Indians was not returned.

The original agreement between the county and the tribe came amid a series of legal disputes surrounding the tribe's River Rock Casino in Geyserville, where tribal leaders clashed with county officials over alcohol sales, wastewater processes, off-reservation impacts of the casino and the tribe's stated independence from county fire safety inspections.

But the Dry Creek Band of Pomo Indians' intention to turn nearly 300 acres on the south side of Petaluma into a resort and casino also remained a sticking point, and was long a source of contention in Petaluma. The city was so motivated to oppose the development that it put the question to voters in 2006. About 80% objected to the idea.

The tribe has the right to establish a second casino in the county, according to a separate agreement with the state of California, and the possibility that it would pick Petaluma has loomed ever larger since the Graton Resort & Casino opened in 2013, cutting off Bay Area

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traffic that might otherwise have continued north to the tribe's River Rock Casino.

Just south of Petaluma, a billboard for the tribe's only Sonoma County casino is perched on tribal land. The River Rock Casino sign on the east side of Highway 101, across from Kastania Vineyards on what used to be known as the Ford Ranch, welcomes northbound traffic into town.

But the town would rather not welcome a casino – or any large development.

Petaluma Council member Mike Healy recalled the 2006 vote, shortly after the tribe bought the property, and offered this:

“We'd prefer not to see growth beyond the city's urban growth boundary,” Healy said.

Petaluma so wants to prevent gaming in or near the city that it sought a stake in 2018 negotiations between Sonoma County and Lytton Rancheria involving 500 acres of land near Windsor, seeking veto power over changes to the gaming ban in that agreement also.

Healy said he would support other types of development on tribal land south of town, adding he'd vote to extend city infrastructure to provide recycled water for a tribe-owned vineyard.

But no city officials have broached the topic with tribal leaders in recent memory, Healy said.

“It wouldn't be a bad idea for the city to reach out to the tribe to see if there's a mutually agreeable outcome for non-gaming uses of the property, but that hasn't happened,” Healy said. “But it's always good to talk.”

Tyler Silvy is editor of the Petaluma Argus-Courier. Reach him at tyler.silvy@arguscourier.com, 707-776-8458, or [@tylersilvy](https://twitter.com/tylersilvy) on Twitter.

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