

Sonoma County, Dry Creek tribe poised to extend agreement banning casinos near Petaluma for another

Written by Administrator
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A longstanding agreement between Sonoma County and the Dry Creek Rancheria Band of Pomo Indians is poised to be extended another decade, preventing the tribe from building a casino near Petaluma's southern border until at least 2035.

"We have come a long way in our intergovernmental relationships and this agreement is yet another step forward," Sonoma County Supervisor David Rabbitt said in an email regarding the proposed 10-year extension. The county Board of Supervisors is tentatively scheduled to consider the agreement at its Jan. 24 meeting.

The ongoing deal rests on a memorandum of understanding — a binding agreement first established in 2008 and extended or modified multiple times since — that prohibits the tribe from pursuing a casino on its 277-acre property located just south of Petaluma.

[Amended and Restated Memorandum of Agreement between the Dry Creek Rancheria, Band of Pomo Indians and the County of Sonoma](#)

The most recent extension of this agreement, [signed in 2015](#), prevented the tribe from building a casino until 2025. In exchange, Dry Creek Rancheria saved an estimated \$33 million in payments it would otherwise have made to the county to offset impacts from its River Rock Casino near Geyserville.

"All in all, I am happy to add language in the (new agreement) to prohibit gaming on the Petaluma property for another 10 years," said Rabbitt, who negotiated the new deal directly with tribal Chairman Chris Wright over several months.

The tribe, he said, requested the extension "in order to make additional investments" to River Rock Casino.

Calls and an email to Wright seeking comment on the agreement were not immediately returned Friday.

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River Rock, the county's first casino, opened in 2002 following an acrimonious fight between the tribe, on one side, and nearby residents and the county, on the other. But, despite fierce local opposition, once the tribe's Alexander Valley property was taken into federal trust — in effect, designated a reservation by the Bureau of Indian Affairs — the tribe could do whatever it wished with the land.

That was one of many maneuvers by the county's five recognized tribes to establish casinos in the area. In 2013, following attempts to build a casino near Highway 37, the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria opened Graton Resort & Casino in Rohnert Park, resulting in a reported 50% drop in revenue to River Rock.

It was the prospect of having its business undercut by Graton Rancheria that led Dry Creek Rancheria to buy the parcel south of Petaluma. In April 2006, following its purchase of the property, the tribe filed to transfer the land to the federal government to be held in a trust and making it sovereign territory, which would clear the way for a casino — but the initial memorandum was signed soon after.

Anti-casino sentiment in Petaluma was strong at the time. A nonbinding casino measure placed on Petaluma's ballot in November 2006 by City Council members found that nearly 80% of voters opposed having a casino near the town.

More recently, [Lytton Rancheria agreed](#) to a chance to develop its own reservation near Windsor in exchange for never attempting to build a casino — there or anywhere. And last spring, the Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a resolution [opposing the Koi Nation of Northern California's attempts](#) to place land southeast of Windsor into trust to build a casino there. (The board also discounted Koi Nation's historical ties to the county, calling it a "non-Sonoma County tribe.")

Rabbitt noted the upcoming 10-year extension of the Dry Creek Rancheria agreement does have an exception carved out in case the Koi Nation succeeds in its ongoing bid to build a casino in the county. Should that happen, "the Dry Creek tribe could seek to take the Petaluma property into trust for gaming purposes prior to March 18, 2035." Otherwise, under terms of the extension, the tribe could take the property into trust, but not for gaming purposes.

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“That whole land trust process is kind of an arcane process, and it typically doesn’t involve a whole lot of local control or local say,” said Matt Brown, a Sonoma County communications specialist working closely with Rabbitt. “(Memos of understanding) are a mechanism giving local governments some say in what happens on neighboring land.”

Argus-Courier editor Don Frances can be reached at 707-776-8458, at don.frances@arguscourier.com, or on Twitter at [@MrDonFrances](https://twitter.com/MrDonFrances) . *Argus-Courier staff writer Amelia Parreira can be reached at 707-521-5208 or at amelia.parreira@arguscourier.com.*

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