

NORTH RICHMOND — Plan for casino gets positive reception Landless Indian tribe wants to put in 2,000 slot machines

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A landless Indian tribe planning to build a casino in North Richmond that would be three times larger than some in Reno is receiving a warm welcome from many residents of an impoverished community eager for new jobs and financial gains.

The Scotts Valley Band of Pomo Indians earlier this year bought 30 acres on Parr Boulevard and hopes to open a 225,000-square-foot, Nevada-style casino with 2,000 slot machines, more than 90 gaming tables, a steakhouse and buffet.

Myriad legal and governmental hurdles must be cleared before the gaming begins in three years, but if all goes according to the Pomo's plans, western Contra Costa County could have two -- and possibly three -- casinos within a few miles of each other. Although some eagerly await the sound of jackpots filling county and city coffers, not everyone is happy.

"I'm not excited about having West County turn into casino central," said Supervisor John Gioia, whose district includes the site of the proposed casino. Casino San Pablo, located about 4 miles away, plans a major expansion to include Vegas-style gaming, and the city of Richmond is negotiating with developers eager to find a tribe and build a casino and resort at Point Molate.

"Unfortunately, when voters in California passed Proposition 1A, they didn't realize this could bring urban gaming into their own backyard," Gioia said of the 2000 initiative that approved Nevada-style gaming on Indian reservations. "It sort of opened a Pandora's box. People thought it would be located on the edge of town or in a rural area."

The Bureau of Indian Affairs will hold a public hearing in Richmond tonight to begin a review of the casino's environmental impact, marking the start of what could be a years-long

bureaucratic process in which the Interior Department designates the land a reservation and the tribe forges a compact with the state.

Speaking to an audience of predominantly black North Richmond residents last week, Pomo tribal Chairman Don Arnold compared the histories of poverty and oppression shared by the American Indian and African American communities and said North Richmond would be a place where the tribe could become economically self sufficient while helping the community do the same.

"I'm sure that North Richmond and Parchester Village understand that more than anyone out there," Arnold said.

He displayed a colorful rendering of a casino that might be called Sugar Bowl and will include a huge parking garage, events center, sports bar and food court. It would be roughly the size of a Wal-Mart Super Center and almost three times larger than Reno's Peppermill casino, which is about 74,000 square feet and has about 1,800 slot machines.

The casino could generate \$366 million annually, according to tribal officials. It is unknown how much the county and neighboring cities might receive, but tribal officials say similar projects elsewhere have contributed about \$10 million annually to their cities.

Tribal leaders predict the casino would bring about 4,500 new jobs to the area, about half of which would be created by the casino. The remaining jobs would be created by businesses benefiting from the casino.

The promise of jobs and much-needed revenue thrilled many residents eager to share the tribe's good fortune.

"From what they're saying there's a chance that we could make our community better with the casino, even though there's alcohol," said Khalid Elahi, a 36-year-old carpenter who lives in Richmond. "It could work. But they have to keep their

word. If they're going to have the casino, we should have help from them with getting our streets paved and more firefighters and police."

Lee Jones, president of the North Richmond Municipal Advisory Council, said a casino would bring an element of fun to an area with few entertainment options.

"We don't have anything here," Jones said. "This is about entertainment. We don't even have a restaurant."

However, others said a disenfranchised community already plagued by crime and drugs didn't need another vice like gambling. Some questioned why casinos never appeared in upscale communities like Walnut Creek or Orinda.

"It'd be devastating here," said the Rev. Ben Stevenson of the Macedonia Baptist Church in Richmond. "You'll have people on fixed incomes trying to go to the casino to win something. ... It just don't pay. You might get lucky, but you won't get blessed."

Unsure of exactly how the process works, Stevenson asked the tribe to let residents vote on whether or not they wanted a casino in their backyard. But as county officials have learned, the tribes are sovereign governments and are not required to win local support before building a casino.

County officials and neighborhood residents aren't the only ones leery of the rush to build casinos in Contra Costa County. Some casino operators in Nevada aren't very happy about the idea of Bay Area residents' being able to gamble so close to home.

"The large fear here in Nevada," said Bo Bernhard, director of gambling research at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, "is that Reno is going to die a slow death because of these Northern California gaming casinos."

The public hearing will be from 6-9 p.m. tonight at the Richmond Memorial Auditorium, 403 Civic Center Plaza.