

## **Tribe's resort doesn't justify 'racinos'**

Ned Norris Jr., Commentary

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In recent weeks, Arizona's commercial horse and dog tracks have begun an all-out misinformation campaign. This is their latest attempt to expand off-reservation gaming, and they are using the exact same tactics they unsuccessfully employed during their 2002 ballot initiative.

In 2002, more than 80 percent of Arizona voters said "no" to casino-style gaming at dog and horse tracks, despite millions spent on the campaign by out-of-state track owners.

Understanding the public's overwhelming opposition, the wealthy track owners have decided to try their hand at getting support from the Arizona Legislature. To try and accomplish this, the tracks and their consultants have focused their attacks on the Tohono O'dham Nation.

Once again, they've resorted to misinformation, innuendo and smear tactics to try to push their unpopular agenda. They claim the Tohono O'dham Nation's West Valley Resort project is an unexpected expansion of gaming. That claim is simply wrong. This project is completely within the framework of both the state gaming compacts and federal law as intended when enacted and as functioning today.

Here are the facts:

The construction of the federal government's Painted Rock Dam in 1960 resulted in the disastrous flooding of more than 9,000 acres in the Tohono O'dham Nation's San Lucy District. To compensate for this loss, Congress passed a unique federal law granting the Tohono O'dham Nation the right to purchase replacement lands to be taken into trust for economic development purposes.

The passage of this 1986 law was shepherded through Congress by four of the biggest names in Arizona's rich political history - Barry Goldwater, Dennis DeConcini, Mo Udall and John McCain - and signed into law by President Ronald Reagan.

In accordance with federal law, the Nation purchased a 135-acre parcel in unincorporated Maricopa County and is seeking to place it into trust as reservation land. Working together with local communities, the Nation then intends to construct the West Valley Resort.

This facility is also permitted under the state compacts that were first established in 1993 and reaffirmed by Arizona's voters in 2002. While many tribes are currently using their full allotment of facilities under the terms of these agreements, the Tohono O'odham Nation is not.

Unlike the horse- and dog-tracks' profits, which are frequently funneled to out-of-state owners, revenues from the Tohono O'odham Nation's facility will stay in Arizona. They will be used to address critical needs of the Tohono O'odham Nation and provide economic opportunities in the West Valley and Arizona.

The West Valley Resort project will generate an estimated \$300 million annually and provide 3,000 permanent jobs. A recent poll of Maricopa County voters found consistent support for both Indian gaming and the West Valley project. In fact, 73 percent of the public supports this important economic development project.

The Tohono O'odham Nation has provided safe, enjoyable entertainment venues for more than two decades, willingly adhering to an unprecedented level of regulatory oversight to ensure these venues are fairly operated. Federal and state laws are comprehensive and clear, and the Tohono O'odham has always played by the rules. In contrast, the horse and dog tracks have a history of lax regulation and limited oversight.

It is an absurd world indeed when a major economic development asset for the West Valley is used as an argument to dismantle a balanced, reasonable and effective state gaming policy with extensive regulation that has worked exactly as intended. The public, the governor and the Legislature must see the "racino" proposal as the absurdity it is, and send the tracks back to the barn.

*Ned Norris Jr. is chairman of the Tohono O'odham Nation.*