

Arizona Republic

Poll backs Glendale casino, Tohono O'odham tribe says

by **Carrie Watters** - Apr. 1, 2010 12:45 PM
The Arizona Republic

A poll released this week says that 68 percent of West Valley voters support a tribal resort and casino near Glendale's sports and entertainment district. But an opposition group has ramped up efforts to chip away at that support.

The Gila River Indian Community, which operates the only West Valley casino, has created a "Keeping the Promise" campaign. The group launched radio spots this week to attack the Tohono O'odham Nation's plan as greedy.

The Tohono O'odham are battling to create a reservation off 91st and Northern avenues and to build a 600-room resort and casino. Tribal Chairman Ned Norris Jr. said the latest poll validates the project.

"We remain committed to working with local communities to ensure this important economic development project moves forward," he said.

The Tohono O'odham commissioned the Behavior Research Center poll, which concluded that support for the project is largely based on economics.

About 7 in 10 of those surveyed were more favorable because of the 6,000 construction jobs and 3,000 permanent jobs the project is touted to create, as well as its private funding and the tribe's estimate it would generate millions in state and local tax revenue.

"It's like the old saying goes that people vote with their wallets," said Jim Haynes, president of the Phoenix-based Behavior Research Center.

The survey, which had a plus or minus 5 percent margin of error, polled 400 voters living west of Interstate 17.

For the 24 percent who opposed the resort and casino, the majority were unfavorable because of anti-gaming sentiment. Twenty-three percent of the opponents cited the project's proximity to Raymond S. Kellis High School.

Among all respondents, 64 percent said proximity to the school, which the tribe says will have a buffer with open space and a resort building, did not negatively affect their view of the project.

Six in 10 favored the location's direct access to Loop 101.

The casino has faced resistance from Glendale leaders, as well as Gov. Brewer, Sen. Jon Kyl and Sen. John McCain. That political opposition swayed only 8 to 13 percent of voters to be less favorable of the project.

Sixty-six percent of those surveyed disagreed with a bill supported by Glendale that would allow the city to annex the Tohono O'odham-owned land without the tribe's consent. Such an annexation would derail the tribe's plans.

The bill, which was approved by the state House of Representatives, has gone nowhere in the Senate.

This is the tribe's second poll. The first, conducted shortly after announcing its plans more than a year ago, found 74 percent support.

Glendale city attorney Craig Tindall questioned the accuracy of the latest poll and accused the Tohono O'odham of pandering to current economic conditions and most people's view of favoring jobs.

"A longer term view of the economics and jobs does not support the tribe's position," Tindall said.

But creating a reservation for gaming is not just about economics, he said.

"It involves legal, political, social, and policy issues, all of which are very important and all of which do not support the tribe's position," Tindall said.

He and the Gila River group criticize the Tohono O'odham, saying that when Arizona voters in 2002 approved Indian gaming, they were promised it would not expand in the Valley.

That argument may not hold much sway. The latest poll said only 2 in 10 had a less favorable opinion of the project after hearing that argument.