

Rethink Use of Tribal Land
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By Ashton D. Ellis

There is something rotten in the way that California government treats Native Americans. While the politicians supporting Indian gaming Props. 94, 95, 96 and 97 are promoting the initiatives in terms of universal social and economic prosperity, Californians know better.

The only guarantee with these measures is that four tribes will be forced to pay millions of dollars to the state and other Indians in exchange for employment restrictions and environmental regulation.

Only government could declare victory because of a deal resulting in intrusive oversight and forced profit-sharing. The real solution to helping California's Indian tribes become more prosperous is the same as it is for the population at large: less regulation, more innovation. The only barrier is politicians bent on dictating what the tribes can do with their own land.

Unfortunately, the only proven way to make tribal land profitable is to build a casino. There is no good reason to restrict a reservation's potential to a form of entertainment many find immoral, unless, of course, the government supports it.

California can do better. The home of Hollywood and Silicon Valley should be the birthplace of a new kind of creativity. A good start would be to rethink the use of tribal land.

For example, the government should encourage tribes to parlay their land's exemption from state regulation into a selling point to attract businesses. Echoing many Southern states, California tribes could trumpet their relaxed union rules. Cities in Alabama, Mississippi and Texas used similar circumstances to convince major automakers to relocate. The results were increases in jobs, tax revenues and the standard of living.

The Green Valley Initiative is an attempt by local stakeholders to make the Inland Empire synonymous with "green" technology. In what could be billed as a test case for future projects, local and tribal leaders could partner with "green" venture capitalists looking for ways to make a cleaner environment.

The infusion of private-sector businesses into Riverside County would benefit more than just the tribes. An influx of eco-friendly jobs would have a ripple effect throughout the local economy. As the population boom has shown us, more jobs lead to more income and services.

Tribal lands can offer an alternative vision for economic success because they are perhaps the last patches of free earth in California. Shorn of Sacramento's unceasing overweight, these sacred areas could produce two remarkable success stories: the betterment of Indians and the resurgence of the state economy.

Just Gimmicks

The state's budget deficit continues to grow, but the only fixes suggested in Sacramento are short-term gimmicks like the Indian gaming propositions. Allowing the tribes to prove that deregulation leads to higher wages and better services would give Californians an alternative to the status quo of higher taxes and greater restrictions.

At a time when politicians are signaling a new round of tax increases, the success of tribal enterprise would be a stark reminder that the government that governs least, governs best.

Our public policy should not allow success to be reduced to a choice between leaving the tribe or building a casino. Instead of unleashing the economic potential of tribal lands, the Feb. 5 ballot initiatives will only further restrict the movement of money and ideas.

Californians should vote no on the gaming propositions and demand reforms that promote true social and economic prosperity for all

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