

Oropeza halts Gabrielino-Tongva reservation bill

By Gene Maddaus Staff Writer

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State Sen. Jenny Oropeza has dropped a bill to create a reservation for the Gabrielino-Tongva tribe after learning that it planned to use the measure as a first step toward getting a casino.

Oropeza submitted the bill in December with language that ruled out Indian gaming on the proposed Gabrielino reservation. But a letter that surfaced within the last few days explains the tribe's strategy as a "Step 1, Step 2" approach to building a casino.

"At a later date, after the reservation is established, we will return to seek a separate approval for gaming rights," says the Jan. 11 letter from the tribe's council to its membership.

Oropeza dropped the bill Monday, saying she had been misled by the tribe's representatives.

"Clearly we were on different pages," she said. "I don't like dealing with folks who don't deal straight-up."

The Gabrielino-Tongva tribe, which has historic

roots in Los Angeles County, has sought federal and state recognition for several years.

The effort has been plagued by factional feuds and lawsuits, as rival groups claim to be the Gabrielinos' true representatives. The Gabrielino/

Tongva tribe, a separate group, has explicitly disavowed efforts to build a casino.

The idea of establishing a tribe with gaming rights in Los Angeles County has been a non-starter in Sacramento. Such a development would radically upset the status quo - Indian casinos in the interior of the state, and card clubs and racetracks without Indian-style gaming in L.A. County.

Oropeza said that while she is not personally opposed to a casino in L.A. County, the Senate would never take up the idea.

"Right now I think people are weary of the tribal gaming issue," she said. "I'm not somebody who beats my head against a wall."

Jonathan Stein, the chief executive officer of the Gabrielino-Tongva tribe, said he was "very sorry" that Oropeza decided to drop the bill.

"Jenny has her heart in the right place," Stein said. "It could be she's under a lot of pressure from other tribes in Southern California."

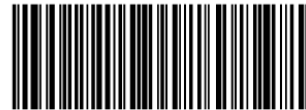
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because her history with the Gabrielinos goes back decades. While a student at California State University, Long Beach, Oropeza worked to prevent the school from building on a Gabrielino burial ground.

Oropeza said she came away from her initial meeting with the tribe's representatives last year believing that their quest for a reservation was a legitimate effort to help native people. She also hoped the bill could help unite the Gabrielino factions.

"They talked about other business opportunities they were planning to conduct," Oropeza said. "They said they wanted to help their people. They were just not totally forthcoming with me."

Stein said that his group has been up front about its intention to ultimately get a casino in L.A. County.

"In our mind, we would get a reservation and do nongaming business," he said. "But we're hoping in 10 years to maybe get our own casino. A 10-year horizon is pretty long."

Last year, Oropeza voted for the compacts sponsored by four major Indian gaming tribes. That decision spurred organized labor, which opposed the compacts, to campaign against her in her congressional bid. The four tribes then rallied to her side, pouring hundreds of thousands of dollars into her campaign, which ultimately proved to be unsuccessful.

In the letter to tribal members, the Gabrielino

council described those tribes as "our political enemies," because a Gabrielino casino would compete with the existing casinos. Stein said he believed that Oropeza had been pressured to drop the bill by those tribes, and that the leaked letter had little or nothing to do with her decision.

"That's baloney," Oropeza said. "I had a feeling some of the other tribes would not be thrilled about it."

But Oropeza said she heard objections to the bill only from one tribe.

Oropeza said she was disturbed by the passage in the letter that described the gaming tribes as enemies of the Gabrielinos.

"They're anti-other tribes," she said.

"That's highly objectionable. I am supportive of the tribes that now have recognition. To have anybody that I was working with view those tribes as the enemy, that is not a group I want to work with."

gene.maddaus@dailybreeze.com

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