

Whether it's the boost in local jobs and economic investment supporters hold up, or the increases in traffic and crime detractors point to, there's one area of agreement when it comes to the Enterprise Rancheria casino project: The local impact will be big.

"Right now, I'm smiling thinking about it," said Yuba County Supervisor Mary Jane Griego, one of the most prominent local supporters for the tribal project. "You're really creating a lot of energy when you do something with that area."

But it may not be the kind of energy the county wants in the end, according to those who've opposed the project.

Cheryl Schmit, executive director of a watchdog group on Indian casinos, said given several casinos already in the region, Enterprise Rancheria is more about slicing up a pie into smaller pieces rather than baking something new.

"Revenues will be cannibalized from the hotels and [restaurants](#) you already have there," she said. "It's not really about creating any new jobs, it's just redistributing them."

On a pure dollars basis, casino supporters believe the argument favors them. The federal environmental impact statement for the project estimated an annual \$230 million a year in local economic activity.

If some of those dollars come from casino goers, or even county residents, who are now spending their dollars elsewhere, it's to the county's benefit if the money stays local, Griego said.

Beyond the environmental impact statement, Griego and members of the casino-backing tribe, Estom Yumeka Maidu, point to a memorandum of understanding calling for the casino to give \$5 million annually to the county.

Other county cities have similar agreements, Griego said. Because the money comes with no strings attached, it can be used to address casino impacts, help the county plug deficit holes, or be converted into grants for other community groups, she said.

The casino would also create about 400 jobs, and the MOU stipulates county residents get first crack at those jobs.

"It puts people to work," Griego said.

Yuba County Supervisor Roger Abe, a longtime casino critic, said there may be a boost at first, but he is not sure it will last.

"I'm not sure you'll have a huge economic benefit to the area," said Abe, pointing out in Colusa and Oroville, both of which have had casinos nearby for decades, unemployment is still a problem, and there are few signs of an economic boom.

Yet tribal spokesman Charles Altekruze said if residents in those communities aren't happy with nearby casinos, they're not expressing it.

"They must be doing something right," he said.

Casino backers don't pretend it won't have downsides: Increases in local gambling addiction problems, traffic for the area around the casino, potentially more crime.

But after state and federal governments reviewed the casino plan and the MOUs over more than a decade, Altekruze said, they wouldn't have approved them if such issues weren't addressed.

Other tribes say little

The Estom Yumeka Maidu, the Indian tribe hoping to gain self-reliance by opening the Enterprise Rancheria casino and hotel in Yuba County, is far from the first tribe in the region to do so.

In fact, less than an hour's drive north, south or west of Marysville means finding another tribe opening a casino in the last couple decades, whether it's the tall hotel tower of Thunder Valley Casino near Lincoln or the more modest Colusa Casino.

But inquire about what those tribes experienced when their casinos opened, as an illustration of what might happen to Enterprise Rancheria's 900 tribal members, and the response is muted.

Messages left with the tribes operating Feather Falls Casino near Oroville or Colusa Casino were not returned — nor were calls to two tribes operating prominent casinos in Southern California, hundreds of miles from a potential new casino to the north like that planned for Yuba County.

A spokesman for Thunder Valley's operators said right now, there's not a comparison to make between that tribe and the Estom Yumeka Maidu.

Lawsuits, since combined into one case, effectively prevent Enterprise Rancheria from even considering potential benefits from a casino anytime soon, said Doug Elmets, who works on behalf of the United Auburn Indian Community.

"They have an incredibly long row to hoe," Elmets said, referring to a federal court decision earlier this month he said crimps the tribe's ability to do anything with the casino's 40 acres even if it's taken into trust.

Such impediments also will hurt the ability to get financing for construction, he said.

But a spokesman for Enterprise Rancheria said the suits have the practical effect of limiting economic growth for Yuba County, not just the tribe.

Based on estimates of \$230 million in annual economic impact, said spokesman Charles Altekruze, the area will lose more than \$600,000 for every day the casino is pushed back.

"That's one of the reasons we're so eager to get up and running," he said.

Casinos rake in cash

Looking at a map of the casinos in the greater region around Yuba-Sutter, it's easy to wonder, how many is too many?

Not only are there four Indian casinos less than an hour's drive of the casino site near Sleep Train Amphitheatre, one can find a city's worth of them two hours east in Nevada.

An economist who studies Indian gambling said it's hard to say where is the tipping point.

"It is possible to have saturation," said Alan Meister, principal economist at Nathan Associates Inc. in Irvine and author of the Indian Gaming Industry Report, which will publish its 10th edition this month.

Where saturation lies depends on such issues as demographics, nongaming entities nearby and relative closeness of the casinos, he said.

But in researching the actual effects of a new casino, the best comparison is to any large-scale [entertainment](#) attraction such as a shopping mall or amusement park, he said. Casinos get more negative heat

because they involve gambling, but they're not that different, he said.

What they are is big moneymakers.

Though the Great Recession took a big bite out of casinos in the greater Sacramento area, they still took in \$6.78 billion statewide in direct gambling revenue in 2010, according to Meister's 2012 report.

Nongaming revenue from such casinos — the hotel rooms, buffets, spas and the like — added up to nearly another \$772 million in 2010 in California.

But past numbers, or experience, are little guide to what'll happen if Enterprise Rancheria opens, Meister said.

"It really is case specific," he said. "So many things are different, and you can get very different outcomes."

Placer County activist battles Yuba casino

Whenever Cheryl Schmit weighs in on Enterprise Rancheria, or another potential Indian casino project, the question often comes up: Who does she work for?

As executive director of Stand Up! For California, a casino watchdog group, Schmit said she works for the people of California who have voted for Indian gambling under specific parameters.

Those parameters don't include off-reservation casinos like Enterprise, she said, because 2000's Proposition 1A called for casinos only on tribal lands. Exceptions granted by the state or

federal government don't make it right, she said.

"Often, the only way to get these concerns considered is through judicial review," she said.

Schmit's group is part of a suit against land being taken into trust for Enterprise in Yuba County. Because several other casinos in the area are also suing, proponents have suspected she receives funding from them.

But Schmit, who lives in Placer County, said her support comes from residents concerned about gambling, not tribes themselves.

When she became involved in amendments to tribal compacts for the Pechanga Band of Luiseno Indians five years ago, saying they weren't fair to the state, tribal members responded with a cartoon mocking her.

"I doubt very much they'd say I was on their side," she said of the Pechanga, who operate the Pechanga Resort & Casino in Riverside County.

As for her finances, Schmit said, she points to her annual filings with the Internal Revenue Service and California Secretary of State's office for her nonprofit group. The IRS requires a comprehensive filing for donations totaling above \$50,000 a year, while the SOS' office has a \$25,000 donation cutoff.

"I've never filed anything more than a postcard," she said.

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