

Group calls for cancellation of Republican Women luncheon at California tribal casino

Written by Administrator
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[Amanda Ulrich](#) | Palm Springs Desert Sun

In December, as Californians first began adjusting to new stay-at-home orders, more than [100 women gathered indoors](#) at a tribal casino in Rancho Mirage. They ate lunch, listened to live entertainment and posed for a sprawling group photo with a sign that read, in all caps: "Stop the Steal."

Virtually all attendees were mask-less in the photo, which later [circulated on social media](#) .

A group of Coachella Valley residents is now concerned that a similar scene — lax social distancing and mask wearing, a big crowd of people gathered inside — will repeat itself next week. The same organization that held December's private event, the East Valley Republican Women Federated, has another luncheon planned for Feb. 1 at Agua Caliente Resort Casino Spa Rancho Mirage.

The Republican Women group has held at least five large events at the casino, owned by the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, since September.

"We're encouraging people to send an email to Agua Caliente and ask that the casino shut down this potential superspreader event," said Robert McCann, the organizer behind a Facebook group called Stop the Meal. "Because with that amount of people, they go home to their families, back to the community, and they spread it."

Riverside County Sheriff Chad Bianco, an open [opponent to the state's recent pandemic-related shutdowns](#) , was also scheduled to be a guest speaker at the Feb. 1 event. This week, however, he announced that he and his family tested positive for coronavirus. Bianco previously said he had "[zero worry of the virus](#)" and that his "immune system is firing on all cylinders."

Bianco confirmed to The Desert Sun that he will still be under quarantine next Monday, and will not be able to speak at the meeting.

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Terry Applegate, a Cathedral City resident, said the goal of canceling next week's event isn't about singling out one group; though she doesn't agree with the politics of the Republican Women organization, she says, no group should be gathering indoors right now.

Applegate added that their group is aware there could be criticism that non-Native Americans are suggesting a tribe cancel an event at their casino.

"But my attitude is, you know, we are global citizens," she said. "And we have a responsibility to act in a responsible manner."

Joy Miedecke, president of the Republican Women organization, would not comment on the efforts to cancel the event. Agua Caliente spokesperson Kate Anderson did not respond to several requests for comment.

Another Republican Women luncheon is planned at Agua Caliente for March 1.

Nine outbreaks at area casinos

Gov. Gavin Newsom lifted stay-at-home orders across the state Monday after nearly two months of restrictions for many California residents.

Still, Riverside County remains in the most prohibitive tier of the state's COVID-19 reopening system. That level means there is a "widespread" risk of transmission, and imposes substantial limitations on commercial activity and gatherings. Groups of people are limited to three separate households and to outdoor spaces only.

Native American tribes, as sovereign nations, are not required to follow the state's coronavirus rules. Though all tribal casinos in Riverside County closed voluntarily during the first stay-at-home order last March, they remained open for the second, which lasted from early December to Jan. 25.

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In between those shutdowns, each California tribe with a gaming facility has taken a different approach to operating: Some have curbed indoor dining, for example, while others have kept bars and restaurants open inside.

Agua Caliente has, since at least September, offered large, indoor conference areas for private events at its Rancho Mirage casino.

In the general casino area, health measures like a 50% capacity limit, mask rules and increased cleaning are in place, according to the casino's website. It's unclear what rules apply or are enforced for special events.

Health officials have documented nine separate COVID-19 outbreaks at Riverside County casinos between July and this month. There are 10 casinos in the county. The nine outbreaks include 68 total cases.

It's not known if the Republican Women events have specifically led to any outbreaks. The county does not disclose the names of individual businesses or organizations that have outbreaks.

Residents concerned for staff, community

The group of residents now urging Agua Caliente to cancel next week's event is made up of about 15 "progressive activist types" who joined forces recently, McCann said.

Applegate said she and her wife, who has an autoimmune disease, have been very careful since last February. Applegate tries to go grocery shopping only once every few weeks to minimize risk to her wife.

The couple was alarmed when they saw the Republican Women group was hosting an election night party at the casino in November, followed by a Christmas event the next month.

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Attendees at those gatherings could contract coronavirus there, and then spread it in other locations, like a grocery store, Applegate said.

"And I was like, 'Oh my god. Why?'" she said of the December event. "It also risks the health and lives of the (casino) staff, the employees, the people serving. That any group would hold an event, and that events are being held inside, is just galling to me."

Three employees at two casinos in the Coachella Valley, including Agua Caliente Rancho Mirage, [told The Desert Sun last month](#) they felt stuck in a dangerous work environment as COVID-19 cases soared.

The Agua Caliente employee said they hoped the casino would close for a few weeks during the stay-at-home order. That employee does not work in the private events section of the casino.

Tribal sovereignty and COVID-19

Clifford Trafzer, a professor of American Indian Affairs at the University of California, Riverside, said that "encouraging positive actions by all people" to fight coronavirus "makes good sense for everyone concerned."

Trafzer noted that, historically, diseases brought by settler communities killed large swaths of the Native American population. Now, the COVID-19 mortality rate is higher among American Indians than among white people, according to [data from 14 states collected by the CDC](#).

What impacts tribal members on reservations also has an impact on those off reservations, and vice versa, he said.

"Asking a tribe or organization to reconsider hosting an event that has the potential of spreading COVID-19 seems reasonable and responsible," he said.

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That said, it's up to tribal councils to determine the best interest of their people, employees and communities, Trafzer added.

"Tribal leaders are highly intelligent and thoughtful people, and I am confident councils would consider recommendations made by non-Native citizens," he said. "Final decisions and responsibilities, however, rest with the councils."

Other than the Republican Women group, it's unclear if other organizations have used Agua Caliente event space in recent months. Anderson, the tribe's spokesperson, has not responded to numerous requests for comment about that practice.

In a [previous Desert Sun article](#), president Miedecke maintained that attendees at the December luncheon were spaced out and masked until they ate. The group photo was an extension of protesting, she said, "just like many (people) do at events several times a week here in the Coachella Valley."

"We respected the management and adhered to their rules and apologize for the moment we slipped off our masks during our protest," she added.

Amanda Ulrich covers Native American issues in Southern California for The Desert Sun. She can be reached by email at amanda.ulrich@desertsun.com or Twitter at @AmandaCUlrich.

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