

# The Press Democrat

## PD Editorial: Windsor casino deserves a fair and open hearing



The Koi Nation unveiled plans to build a \$600 million casino resort on Shiloh Road near Windsor. (KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat)

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The biggest surprise in Sonoma County this past week wasn't District Attorney Jill Ravitch crushing a recall or even the striking similarity between a Santa Rosa artist's "Tax the Rich" creation and a gown worn by a celebrity congresswoman at a society gala in New York.

It was instead the Koi Nation unveiling plans for a resort and casino on the outskirts of Windsor.

The 90-member Native American tribe acquired 68 acres of vineyards where they hope to build a casino and hotel, with restaurants, meeting space and a spa. The \$600 million complex would be one of the largest of its kind in Northern California.

If the announcement was unexpected, the official reaction was not.

“Gobsmacked,” said Rep. Jared Huffman, whose district includes the casino site.

“Not the right plan for the north county,” echoed state Sen. Mike McGuire.

As with any large development, there are obstacles that must be addressed — availability of water and disposal of wastewater, traffic and road capacity, fire danger and further encroachment on the wildland-urban interface. These issues are usually dealt with in the local planning process. However, because Native American tribes are sovereign, the federal government has most of the regulatory authority over casinos.

The other issue is, of course, gambling. Some people object on moral grounds or worry about gambling addictions. For some others, casinos are like housing. They aren’t opposed to new ones — so long as they’re built somewhere else.

Sonoma County has two tribal casinos and, aside from an opening day traffic jam at the Graton Rancheria casino in Rohnert Park, there have been few negative impacts. With 2,000 employees, the Graton casino is one of the county’s largest private employers and attracts visitors from throughout the Bay Area. In addition to ripple effects on the economy, the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria give about \$1 million a year to the city of Rohnert Park and contribute to other local causes, including relief for fire victims and operation of Tolay Lake Regional Park.

There are plenty of other options for gambling in Sonoma County — horse racing during the fair, off-track betting at the Jockey Club, a poker room in Petaluma and lottery ticket sales at supermarkets, liquor stores and other venues. In 2022, voters are expected to decide whether to legalize sports betting in California.

The Koi proposal should be considered within that broader context.

The first hurdle for the tribe will be getting the land it purchased near Shiloh Ranch Regional Park taken into trust by the U.S. Interior Department. If they succeed, the Koi must then negotiate a gaming compact with California’s governor. The compact, which would govern the size of the casino and what kinds of gambling would be allowed, must be ratified by the state Legislature.

These are formal processes, which often take several years, with opportunities for public input along the way. The Koi are entitled to a fair hearing.

The Koi haven't always gotten a fair shake from the government. Their last land, a reservation near Clear Lake, was seized 65 years for an airport, and they lost their official tribal recognition. It was restored in 2000 by the Interior Department.

Before building a casino, Koi leaders must persuade state and federal officials that their Windsor property is an appropriate location. While they don't need local approval, they do need to be good neighbors. That means working voluntarily with local governments to mitigate environmental impacts, addressing concerns raised by local residents and ensuring that there are no more surprises.

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