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Editorial in San Diego Union Tribune 8/19/2011

A new partnership for better county services

By Bo Mazzetti

Currently, we have an immediate opportunity to improve roads, public safety, fire and other government services in San Diego County at no cost to taxpayers. This can be achieved by redirecting revenue sharing dollars generated by tribal gaming enterprises from Sacramento to San Diego County.

Indian gaming has contributed extensively to California in two important ways. It has enabled tribes to build our own economies and governments. This has generated jobs and economic opportunity for us and our neighbors located near our enterprises. In addition, tribal gaming has contributed millions of dollars in revenue sharing from our casinos to the state and local governments.

Today, the Rincon Tribe is negotiating with the Brown administration for an amended compact which creates a new possibility for redirecting more gaming revenue directly to the county. This requires both tribal-state compact changes and a real partnership between the county and the Rincon Tribe. If we can put these changes in place, tribal gaming revenues will be available to fund local needs.

As chairman of the Rincon Band of Luiseño Indians Tribal Council, I am familiar with the struggle of providing critical services to my reservation community, and with many of the same challenges facing San Diego County. As a businessman and contractor, I also understand the need to form partnerships to get things done and to do so efficiently. San Diego County Board of Supervisors Chairman Bill Horn understands this as well. The Rincon Tribe wants to build a new partnership with the county and our neighbors in a way that acknowledges tribal government rights and our mutual obligations to our respective governments and the people we serve. I agree when Chairman Horn says, "Government that is closest to the people governs best." Rincon wants to restructure our compact to make those words a reality by having more Indian gaming dollars stay right here in San Diego County.

The Rincon Tribe has already advanced this idea in our compact negotiation. If we succeed, more of our revenue sharing dollars from Harrah's Rincon Casino would be directed toward critical services aimed at San Diego County, rather than going to Sacramento. Possibilities include basic services such as fire, emergency medical services, and transportation improvements. All of which would benefit our tribe, the county and our neighbors, who live with the potential devastation of wild fires, insufficient fire and police services, and dangerous roads. This would represent genuine regional cooperation that would save lives and protect property.

This change also parallels Gov. Jerry Brown's initiative for a historic realignment of government services, moving decision making and budget authority from Sacramento back to local governments. If Rincon can steer more revenue sharing funds into local government services through these negotiations, it will help relieve some of the financial challenges the governor faces in implementing his realignment of government services. It will also show support for what the governor is trying to achieve.

This is possible because the Rincon Tribe won a very significant federal court decision challenging the "bad faith and illegal" demands made by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger during our compact negotiations with his administration. The 9th Circuit Court decided that the previous administration's demands that Rincon pay into the state treasury created an illegal tax. The U.S. Supreme Court chose not to hear the case and to allow the 9th Circuit Court's decision to stand. Under the 9th Circuit's decision, revenue sharing dollars in the future must be spent closer to the tribal enterprises that generated them, if they are to conform to the federal Indian Gaming Regulatory Act. Now that Rincon is in negotiations for a new gaming compact with Governor Brown's administration, we have the chance to make these changes.

Too often it seems that rather than efficiently providing the services needed by its citizens, government is locked in one political fight after another. Sadly, it seems the art of compromise is being lost, as well as genuine concern for what the public wants. However, I believe that today we have the right kind of leaders in the right offices, both here and in Sacramento, to strengthen regionalism by redirecting tribal revenue sharing back to San Diego County. We will succeed if we stay focused on the people we serve, their real needs and the opportunity to truly work together to improve our region. We must seize the opportunity before us, and we must seize it now.

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Mazzetti is chairman of the Rincon Band of Luiseño Indians.