

Commentary in the Santa Barbara News-Press from Steve Raftopoulos

Letters : Opinion: Saving the Santa Ynez Valley

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A recent editorial on the Chumash raised questions about the motive and validity of opposition to their development objectives in the Santa Ynez Valley.

The Santa Ynez Valley is arguably one of the most beautiful spots in America. Its preservation is a noble goal that benefits all of those who enjoy it. Saving it is worth the looming epic battle that appears on the horizon.

The editorial asked, "What are we saving the valley from?" We are saving it from development that would impact its extraordinary natural beauty, rural character and charm, as well as property values, which play a key role in supporting its preservation. We are saving it from development that would violate our zoning laws and Community Plan, and bypass the oversight and regulation of county government.

The editorial asserts that everything the Chumash are trying to do is opposed. But the reality is that their development objectives quite often run afoul of the rules and laws that we all live by. It references opposition to their plans to build a cultural center and museum. The truth is that the valley would support this project. The problem is, in the 10-plus years that it has been discussed, the tribe has yet to submit a building permit for it. Since no attempt has been made to commence the project, but only an effort to remove the land from county jurisdiction, everyone questions the true intention.

Likewise, it defies common sense and logic that the \$40 million-plus purchase of the 1,400-acre Camp 4 parcel is for tribal housing. With the land out of the control of local government regulation, only the worst can be assumed. What is the worst? Look no further than the decimation of the quaint New England town of Ledyard, Conn. — a prime example of how "fee to trust" enabled development can destroy a local community for the benefit of a few. Just the prospects of this type of development have impacted surrounding property values. Who can calculate the massive decline in valley property values if this development actually comes to fruition?

The editorial also repeats the tribal leadership's claim that the tribal government is the first local government. But what does that mean? We have a citizen-elected government that serves our interests and is accountable to us. What can inflame a free people more than to tell them they are subject to the objectives of an unelected tribal government that represents its own interests? That is simply un-American.

The editorial also claims that the Chumash are the original owners of the valley. Actually, they have claimed previous ownership to 7,000 square miles of premium Central Coast property. Our previous governor staunchly and formally rejected that claim, obviously representing voters that would have the same reaction.

The editorial speaks to the economic benefits of being home to a large casino, but ignores the costs. Crime and DUI arrests have skyrocketed in the valley since the arrival of gambling. This is no surprise. It happens in every community that is introduced to gaming.

Incidentally, our neighboring wine region of Paso Robles has experienced no increase in DUI arrests on its main highway over the same time period, while DUIs on our valley highways (101, 154 and 246) have increased more than 1,000 percent.

The Santa Ynez Valley has more than its fair share of "sovereign" land. Valley and county residents would do well to unite in opposition to the creation of more, as well as the subtle encroachment of "another" government that we did not elect.

Steve Raftopoulos is a resident of Solvang.