



Put shameful bill back into the grinder

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It's no secret that observing the lawmaking process is a lot like watching sausage being made — you really don't want to do that.

But, if someone isn't watching, sometimes unsavory things are tossed into the mix. With regard to legislation, a demonstration of unsavoriness would be California Senate Bill 162, which — if it makes it through the entire process — would prevent state agencies from opposing an Indian tribe's attempts to annex private land into a tribal reservation.

For most folks, that might not seem like much of a big deal. In the Santa Ynez Valley, however, we believe a majority of residents would tell you the idea is preposterous.

The Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians is trying to annex 1,400 acres it owns near the intersection of Highways 154 and 246, with the stated purpose of building homes for tribal members and their families. Many people and several Valley groups oppose such an annexation, fearing the damage that would be done by the potential growth there.

Some also fear the possibility of a second casino operation, even larger than the one now operated so successfully by the Chumash, but the growth damage would be done regardless of whether another casino was built.

It's irrefutable that once private land is annexed into a tribe's reservation, federal regulatory agencies have not cared if the tribe then changes its plans and does something else with the newly annexed property.

If SB 162 makes it through the process, the imposed hands-off requirement would extend to state officials, from the governor to the Legislature to various regulatory agencies.

Especially galling to local opponents of the tribe's expansion plans is that SB 162 began life as something entirely different. First filed in February of last year, it originally dealt with card rooms in Southern California.

But, because sausage and lawmaking can be such a bloody mess, SB 162 has abruptly changed into what amounts to a stealth attempt to allow a special interest — a tribal government — to avoid the legislative and regulatory processes.

The sausage-making nightmare came about because the original bill went through the gut-and-amend process, which takes one kind of bill and turns it into something quite different. That's the stealth part, because when a piece of legislation sits around as long as SB 162 has, lawmakers tend to ignore it. SB 162 — at the least the card-room version — sat idle for a year before morphing into something else entirely.

That's the perfect way to sneak something past the legislative majority and the public — and it's a shameful demonstration of public-policy making.

For now at least, Chumash tribal officials have declined to comment on SB 162. You can read anything you want into that silence, and many Valley residents will probably do just that.

For the bill to become law, it has to jump through some committee hoops, then be signed by the governor, all by Aug. 31. If there is a snag, and it doesn't make that deadline, the bill goes dormant again and must await the next legislative session.

That would be a better fate than it deserves. SB 162 is a chunk of anti-constituent sausage that needs to go back into the grinder — or better yet, the shredder