

The Sacramento Bee

Road plan roils idyllic valley

Residents of Yolo's Capay Valley fear Highway 16 project's impact

By M.S. Enkoji - Bee Staff Writer *Published 2:00 am PDT Sunday, March 11, 2007*

The hillsides and vistas of the Capay Valley, in a pastoral corner of Yolo County, haven't been the same since an Indian-owned bingo parlor opened its doors on a two-lane highway here in 1985.

Since then, the parlor has mushroomed into the Cache Creek Casino Resort, a full-fledged Las Vegas-style gambling attraction embedded in the valley's emerald carpet.

Signs studding Highway 16 as it winds into the valley display homegrown venom toward changes wrought by the massive resort and the steady stream of gamblers who can double the local population on any given day -- or night.

But a sort of detente -- some would even say amiable relationship -- has developed between local forces and the casino's managing tribe.

"People in agriculture are generous in spirit," said Anne McDonald, president of the Capay Valley Coalition. "Everyone recognizes they (the casino) are here and you've got to work with it. You've got to move forward."

McDonald has joined citizens groups to guide and guard the valley's welfare, particularly its agrarian tradition and atmosphere.

The challenges aren't over.

Residents have roundly blasted a new state plan -- prompted by casino traffic -- to flatten, straighten and widen Highway 16 into the valley. As originally proposed, the road changes would mow down 750 oak and walnut trees, seven homes and 169 acres of farmland.

Residents argue that a super highway that invites traffic into the valley could easily inspire more urban amenities around the casino.

McDonald, who raises walnuts, almonds and bees in the valley with her husband, will have to sacrifice several rows of trees to the highway. Another detriment is that faster, high-volume traffic makes it more difficult for farm equipment to operate safely on the road, she said.

The state Department of Transportation is negotiating with the Rumsey Band of Wintun Indians over how much of the estimated \$51 million it will pay to widen and straighten 11 miles of the highway between Interstate 505 and the casino in Brooks.

The people who live here seek less drastic changes to the road that meanders around

longtime orchards and farms. Spot changes to widen and improve the road have already improved safety; a few more are all that's needed, they argue.

But Amarjeet Benipal, deputy district director of program project management for Caltrans, said that while spot fixes work, they merely move the danger around.

On the 11-mile stretch, the accident rate is 1.7 times -- nearly twice -- what the state average is for that kind of road, Benipal said.

In the three years ending in 2005, there were four fatalities, 99 injuries and 222 accidents in all, fewer than before Caltrans added turn lanes and other remedies in 2002, he said.

Still, widening and straightening the road, which will remain two-lane, appear to be the only remedy, he said.

The agency's final environmental report on the project is scheduled to come out by June. Caltrans is trying to satisfy valley residents where it can, Benipal said. The number of trees that will be cut, for example, has been reduced to about 450, he said.

On a recent night, as weekend traffic linked into a solid string of lights, Greta Taber, a retired elementary school principal, stood on her front stoop.

"Those are all going," she said, her hand sweeping toward a stand of flowering almond trees more than 100 years old and some towering oaks lining the road.

The new, widened road would cut right there, she said, pointing to the bottom of her steps. She and her husband, Harmon, will have to move somewhere else on their 500-acre spread. "Frankly, I don't want to do it," she said. "This is a special valley."

A citizens advisory group wants the valley stretch of Highway 16 designated a scenic highway, even if it won't alter the Caltrans plan.

"It would bring attention to the highway, that it's valued for its scenic qualities," said Trini Campbell, who raises organic vegetables on 200 acres.

"Historically, it's been agriculture here and we're committed to keep continuing with what's here," she said.

The casino's chief executive officer, Randy Takamoto, said the casino and Rumsey Band endorse the highway project for safety reasons.

"Those who drive that road want to see it safer," he said.

"I hope that Caltrans listens to (residents') concerns and if they can, make adjustments. We're trying to embrace the community. We understand the concerns," he said.

Yolo County Supervisor Duane Chamberlain, who has been in office for two years, said he is keen on protecting the valley.

"Every developer in California wants to go out there and develop it," he said. "It's pretty the way it is."

He wants Caltrans to work with locals. "That's what I'd like to see: the tribe and the local people work it out." Chamberlain and some valley residents point out that the casino

owners have contributed richly to the region, millions of dollars for items like video cameras for patrol cars and public buildings.

"They (Rumsey Band members) have been generous with the donations with the community at large," said Claire Haag, an artist married to a valley walnut grower. "You have to respect them for that. They really don't have to do that.

"There's a difference in the way people think of the tribe and the casino. They're two different entities. I don't have a problem with the tribe. I do have a problem with the casino changing the whole tenor of the valley between the 505 and Brooks."