



Local group takes issue with tribe's talk to Congress

Greg Simon / Community Matters

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On Aug. 2, a congressional oversight committee hearing on Indian lands invited testimony from tribal representatives, including our local Chumash Chairman Vincent Armenta.

The meeting came at the request of the Chumash and their Washington, D.C., lobbyists seeking congressional intervention on the tribe's request to take 1,400 acres into federal trust. Only one speaker was invited on behalf of community citizens, noted attorney and Valley landowner Marshall Grossman.

Citizens groups following congressional committee agendas caught wind of the hearing and provided much needed balance and context in subsequent written comments to the Congressional Record. One response by the Santa Ynez Valley Concerned Citizens (SYVCC) provided a point by point factual challenge to the testimony provided by Chairman Armenta.

Key examples follow:

His testimony contained factual inaccuracies and omitted critical facts presenting a misleading record of events. He hoped to persuade the committee that congressional intervention was necessary to cure inequities resulting from intransigent communities and governmental leaders who stood in the way of the tribe's desire for a museum and need for housing.

Regarding the 6.9-acre annexation, Chairman Armenta failed to disclose the planned 27,000-square-foot commercial building that could be used for gaming. Instead, he focused the committee on a purported "graveyard" and blamed the community for delaying the museum. In fact, the tax-exempt museum could have been built anytime under local zoning rules, and his evidence of a graveyard remains a mystery.

Also not disclosed was the signed 2005 memorandum of understanding between the tribe and the county — designed to forestall litigation — and the tribe's unilateral withdrawal from the agreement shortly after the county's deadline to appeal the 6.9-acre annexation had passed.

Also omitted was reference to the tribe's other significant land acquisitions proximate to the 6.9-acre parcel and their fee-to-trust application status before BIA.

Chairman Armenta repeatedly referred to a “few” in the community who oppose the tribe’s expansion efforts, ignoring petitions provided to local government with over 13,000 signatures from a community of 22,000 residents.

Regarding the Camp 4 annexation request, the chairman argued that the county has ignored the offered mitigation agreement, but failed to disclose that it contains no project description of what is to be mitigated. Further, he failed to note that once the land is annexed, the tribe could change its use at will.

The chairman argued that the Camp 4 land is needed for housing — readily available in the nearby community — but omits any disclosure of their previously announced plans for extensive commercial development of the property, including gaming.

Completely omitted from the tribe’s testimony was reference to the considerable cost-shifting borne by the community resulting from annexation, and the major negative impact on local government finances.

SYVCC concluded that congressional intervention on behalf of the Chumash is not necessary nor desirable. Consideration of fee-to-trust transfer demands a role for impacted communities, stakeholders and local jurisdictions. The inequities contained in the current fee-to-trust process warrant thoughtful legislative reform.

The above summary is necessarily abbreviated, but a complete copy of our letter to the committee is available for viewing at syvconcernedcitizens.com.

What this exercise clearly demonstrates is that continued vigilance is necessary by citizens, local and state governments, and federal representatives.

Tribes aim to bank land for future and potentially intensive development. We must make our voices heard that impacted residents are stakeholders in the future of their communities and should not be governed by disingenuous and secretive end-arounds by tribal leaders.

We stand by the closing words of our comment letter: “We remain hopeful that equitable solutions can come with meaningful dialogue between all affected parties.”

“Community Matters,” written by a group of local residents, explores local topics of public interest. Greg Simon is vice president of Santa Ynez Valley Concerned Citizens.