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Gambling with state's future

Article Launched: 01/15/2008 06:17:13 PM PST

It's somewhat ridiculous that California voters will be forced Feb. 5 to separately consider four only slightly different Indian gambling propositions on their ballots.

But it's going to be easy enough to do the right thing: Simply punch "no" four times next to propositions 94, 95, 96 and 97.

Taken together, they would allow a vast, unprecedented expansion of four already wealthy tribes' casino empires in California, and simultaneously not allow any such expansion of gambling rights for the other 104 recognized tribes in the state.

In fact, the propositions would authorize 17,000 new slot machines in the state for just the Pechanga Band, the Morongo Band, the Sycuan Band and the Agua Caliente Band of tribes. Opponents of the deals say they would make California home to some of the largest casinos in the world. Those 17,000 slots are more than the combined number of one-armed bandits at fully 12 of the largest Las Vegas casinos, including the Bellagio, MGM Grand, Mirage and Mandalay Bay.

Does California really need such a vast expansion of gambling in our state? We would answer with an emphatic "no."

The reason we're in the predicament of having to vote four times to kill the deal in the first place is at least a decent exercise in democracy. The Legislature, many of whose members get big contributions from the casino groups, rammed through the sweetheart agreements with the four big tribes in Riverside and San Diego counties.

A group of citizens fortunately gathered the signatures of almost 3 million voters in order to give us a chance to give the thumbs-down to the shenanigans. That's just what voters need to do.

"Modest expansions" to the size of their gambling empires were promised the tribes in what we still consider the misguided first allowances of casino gambling in our state in 1998. These expansions are by no means modest. A study by Occidental College professor Peter Dreier shows that at least one of the expanded casinos that would be allowed without a "no" vote would be more than twice as large as the biggest Vegas casino - generating as many car trips each night as a sold-out sports arena, with no rights by surrounding communities to attempt to mitigate the traffic.

According to journalist and USC Annenberg School of Communication professor Marc Cooper, California's gambling tribes have poured about \$150 million worth of campaign contributions into state pols' pockets in the decade since casino gambling was legalized here. Think that might just have something to do with the push to wildly expand something we were promised would only grow modestly?

Cooper also cites a study by California's Office of Problem and Pathological Gambling that shows there are 1.2 million compulsive gamblers in the state. The price of such gambling addiction - not to mention the devastation to the welfare of gamblers' families - is "never factored into the cost-benefit analysis of opening more casinos," Cooper notes.

Some may ignore the bad news and think they should vote for more slots because of the sorely needed money that would consequently flow into the state's treasury in a time of huge deficits. But under the initial phase of the proposed expansion, the state's legislative analyst estimates new revenues at about \$200 million annually. That's nowhere near a fix for a \$14 billion problem.

We don't think that California's economic future lies in milking the at-risk populace with more casino gambling. If you agree, vote "no" on propositions 94, 95, 96 and 97 on Feb. 5.