

500 turn up to protest casino

Garden Grove – About 500 Vietnamese Americans packed the Community Meeting Center on Tuesday evening, carrying banners protesting the proposed casino resort on Harbor Boulevard in the city-designated resort area.

It was a standing-room-only crowd inside council chambers, and hundreds of others watched the meeting on television as they occupied other rooms at the center holding small signs and large banners that read „No casino in Garden Grove“ and „Gambling destroys lives.“

At least a dozen people from the audience who spoke during the public-comments section of the meeting said they are opposed to the project because they fear it will „destroy family and cultural values“ and bring crime and traffic into the area.

On Monday, five elected officials signed a letter sent to Mayor Bill Dalton voicing the community's objection to the casino project, which has yet to receive city approvals. The letter was signed by Lan Nguyen and Trung Nguyen, both Garden Grove Unified School District trustees; Andrew Nguyen, Westminster School District trustee; Westminster City Councilman Tri Ta; and Truong Diep, one of the board of directors of the Midway City Sanitary District.

The proposal came from Jonathan Stein, chief executive officer of the Santa Monica-based Gabrielino-Tongva Indian Tribe, who is proposing two casino resorts along the lines of Bellagio and Paris on the Las Vegas Strip, with 2,500 to 7,500 slot machines, upscale hotel rooms starting at USD 300 a night, stadiums featuring concerts and sports events, theaters, nightclubs and shops.

Stein, who held an Aug. 2 meet-and-greet with Vietnamese American community leaders, said Tuesday that he was disappointed by the officials' letter.

„This letter is a political hit piece, and we're sorry to see it mar what has otherwise been a very professional response from the city, residents and the business community,“ he said.

Bernie Acuna, one of the tribe's council members, said he was „outraged.“

„Why don't they understand that we don't want people's rent money?“ he said. „We're only hoping to attract tourists.“

Stein has promised giant dividends for the city and the school district if the casino is approved, including USD 100 million upfront for city infrastructure, USD 70 million a year from slot machine revenues and a college scholarship for every high school graduate in the Garden Grove Unified School District.

Lan Nguyen dismissed those offers as unrealistic for an Indian tribe that is yet to receive recognition from the federal government and get state permits to even operate a casino.

Some are also concerned about what a casino so close to Asian communities would do to families. Asians' tendency to gamble is not a myth, said Timothy Fong, co-director of UCLA's Gambling Studies Program. Fong is studying Asian populations' gambling habits.

„Certain communities, especially the Vietnamese American community, are very vulnerable,“ he said. „Most Asians who gamble are not addicts, but those who are addicted are very severely addicted.“

Stein, however, says the Garden Grove casino would exercise caution in handing out casino cards and will execute a program to keep out addicts.

City Councilman Mark Rosen said hours before the meeting that the letter sent out by Lan Nguyen and other officials is „disgraceful.“

„It shows that the Vietnamese community is divided and

fractured," he said. „These five officials who have signed this letter don't represent the will of the community. I don't think they've even read the casino proposal.“