

California voters may be asked to decide Indian casino expansion

Opponents of a nearly 30 percent expansion of tribal gambling began turning in petition signatures Friday for what could prove to be latest ballot fight over Indian casinos in California.

A group opposing deals between four wealthy Southern California tribes and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said it has collected enough signatures to let voters decide if the agreements should be revoked. It said the rest of the signatures will be turned in by Monday to the secretary of state's office.

The deals, which were approved by the Legislature in June, would allow the four tribes to install as many as 17,000 additional slot machines.

In exchange, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians in Palm Springs, the Morongo Band of Mission Indians in Cabazon, the Pechanga Band of Luiseno Indians in Temecula and Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation in San Diego would share a percentage of their earnings with the state.

But a coalition of two other tribes, horsetrack owners and a casino workers' union say the deals are flawed. The coalition consists of the United Auburn Indian Community east of Sacramento, the Pala Band of Mission Indians in Riverside County, Unite HERE International Union and Terry Fancher, managing partner of the parent company of Bay Meadows and Hollywood Park race tracks.

They point to a state analyst's report that found the gambling expansion for the four tribes would not provide as much money

to the state as promised. They also argue the deals amount to one of the single largest expansions of gambling in the nation's history and a major shift in the state's policy toward Indian gambling.

Al Lundeen, spokesman for the coalition, said the group began turning in nearly 700,000 signatures to put four referenda against the compacts on the Feb. 5 presidential primary ballot.

„Voters want to have a say, and they want to say no to this drastic change in gaming policy,“ Lundeen said.

Roger Salazar, a consultant for the four tribes targeted by the coalition, said those opposing the agreements have their own interests in mind.

„Two wealthy tribes who don't want competition and a Las Vegas casino mogul were able to bankroll this signature-gathering effort,“ Salazar said. „We think these are good agreements, and voters will feel the same when they learn more.“

Tribes already operate more than 58,000 slot machines in California, where the Indian gambling industry generated an estimated USD 7 billion in annual revenue last year.

Salazar said a competing petition drive by the Agua Caliente, Morongo, Pechanga and Sycuan tribes collected 100,000 signatures in support of the compacts.

The tribes also sent workers to follow opposition signature gatherers and convinced nearly 15,000 of those who signed to rescind their signatures.

If the secretary of state certifies the referenda, the tribes likely would spend tens of millions of dollars to sway voters.