

OPINION

For casino, good health is good business

**NARINDER
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SPEAK YOUR PIECE

A journey that began as a project to research secondhand smoke exposure in one of Northern California's major entertainment venues was a first partnering of Win-River Casino management and my organization, ETR Associates, through our work at California's Clean Air Project. The data gathered over the past seven years has proven science right: A small percentage of smokers can create high levels of dangerous carcinogens in secondhand smoke that is breathed in every day by guests and employees on the gaming floor. In addition, secondhand smoke has resulted in high maintenance costs for the casino. Today, the tribe has decided that good science and good economics combine to make going 100 percent smoke-free a win-win decision.

After long study, careful consideration and patron input, the Tribal Council of Redding Rancheria voted unanimously on Jan 23 to change this outdated stereotype and move Win-River Casino Resort squarely into the 21st century by making their entire property, including

the entire gaming floor, completely smoke-free. Redding Rancheria now stands out as a business and community leader because, in the next month, they are offering guests 100 percent smoke-free gaming, entertainment, and accommodations. We at California's Clean Air Project are most impressed by the fact that as a sovereign nation, Redding Rancheria made a voluntary business decision to provide healthier indoor hospitality and entertainment environment for all.

In California and across the country, few indoor workplaces allow smoking these days. But when one thinks of tribal casinos, it's easy to envision a smoke-filled room, which harkens back to a time when society didn't know better. For years, public health advocates, like myself, and economists have promoted the business benefits of smoke-free gaming. Now casino patrons have also had their say. Win-River management conducted surveys that show casino patrons — both smokers and nonsmokers — clearly favor a smoke-free resort and gaming experience.

 **SURVEY SAYS**

Win-River Casino is planning to go non-smoking inside its facility, starting next month. Do you think it's a good idea?

Yes	86%
No	14%

1,017 votes were cast in this unscientific Redding.com poll as of 3 p.m. Friday.

And Win-River's players are not alone. A study, commissioned by tribal entities and conducted by J.D. Power and Associates, found that the vast majority — 85 percent of gaming customers at Indian casinos in Southern California — expressed a desire for smoke-free casinos.

This is not surprising since demographic studies show that the vast majority of potential Northern California gaming patrons are nonsmokers, which means that a smoke-free casino aligns well with community expectations.

The public is all too

aware that the negative health effects from exposure to secondhand smoke are well documented.

The World Health Organization, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Surgeon General, and the California EPA all have classified secondhand tobacco smoke as a Class A cancer-causing agent to which there is no safe level of exposure. This knowledge has fueled California's plummeting smoking rate, which now stands at just 11 percent.

According to the California Nations Indian Gaming Association, tribal

sovereignty is meant to protect and promote the general welfare of tribal members by developing jobs, local tribal control and governmental institutions needed to ensure tribal community prosperity.

Because of sovereignty, tribal nations are not subject to state laws, such as the 1998 California Smoke-free Workplace Act, which protects workers and the public from secondhand smoke in indoor workplaces.

When it comes to the health of casino patrons, casino employees, and tribal members, the decision to move smoking outdoors is squarely on the shoulders of tribal councils.

The Redding Rancheria is demonstrating forward-looking business and community leadership by making that move. Their savvy business strategy, based on a genuine desire to ensure community health and prosperity, is a beacon for other gaming tribes considering a similar step.

And, when it comes to economic self-sufficiency, it makes smart business sense to be smoke-free.

When the California Smoke-free Workplace Act went into effect for non-Indian gaming clubs in 1998, taxable sales revenues for that year began a steady upward trend of at least 5 percent per quarter in establishments licensed to serve alcohol. This is a situation likely to repeat itself as smoking is moved outdoors at tribal gaming venues. In the highly competitive industry of tribal gaming, the idea of cashing in on the benefits of smoke-free gaming is catching on nationwide.

We applaud Win-River, the largest tribal casino in California to adopt and implement a 100 percent smoke-free policy so far. The time is right to protect the health of casino patrons and staff and attract more non-smoking guests who stayed away before. Win-River's community leadership shows that smoke-free gaming and entertainment is good for business, and good for health.

Narinder Dhaliwal is the director of California's Clean Air Project.