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Road opens doors to tribe

Highway 50 interchange will serve planned casino

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Scores of cars wound slowly along narrow residential roads and bounced over speed bumps last week en route to an event that will bring new access and opportunities to the Shingle Springs Rancheria.

About 1,200 people, including tribal, state and county dignitaries, attended the groundbreaking ceremony for a Highway 50 interchange that will serve the rancheria and the planned Foothill Oaks Casino, scheduled to open in October 2008.

"I never thought this day was ever going to happen," said Nick Fonseca, chairman of the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians.

Blue and white balloons formed archways at the entrance to an awning-covered reception area, where tables were set up for the program and lunch that followed. The ceremony was held on the site once occupied by a giant tent that housed short-lived gaming operations nearly a decade ago.

Access issues have stymied efforts to develop a casino and have prevented the tribe from engaging in other commercial activities on its 160 acres north of Highway 50, between Shingle Springs Drive and Greenstone Road.

What distinguished the Miwok of Shingle Springs from other tribes seeking to develop casinos was lack of access to their own land, said Anthony Miranda, chairman of the California Nations Indian Gaming Association.

In 1965, Highway 50 was re-aligned, effectively cutting off access to the rancheria, except via narrow roads belonging to a neighboring homeowners association. The state promised to build a road, but that promise was never fulfilled, Miranda said.

Though it has taken more than 40 years, the tribe "can now have access to this route and the dream that it engenders," he said.

The interchange is expected to take 14 to 16 months to build. Once a construction road is in place allowing heavy equipment to reach the rancheria, work will begin on the casino.

It will be accomplished at no cost to California taxpayers, said Jody Jones, District 3 director for the state Department of Transportation. She said that the tribe will pay to build and maintain the interchange, and to construct diamond lanes on Highway 50 to handle the anticipated increase in traffic.

Before dignitaries put shovels in the ground, the Shingle Springs Dancers performed traditional dances around a fire that symbolized the heart of the tribe. In the background was a sign that read, "Shingle Springs Rancheria: Where the road to self-reliance begins."

Angela Rivera snapped photos of her 15-month-old son, Albert Roman III, who was decked out in a feathered apron and watching the dancers with his father. Rivera and her family are among those who live on the rancheria.

"Things are going to start happening now," she said, of the interchange and casino projects. "It's a future for our kids."

County Supervisor Jack Sweeney congratulated the tribe on reaching an important milestone, though he noted, "For some people, it's a day of concern."

The interchange was mired for years in lawsuits brought by the county and a citizens group worried about the effects the casino would have on traffic and the county's economy.

El Dorado County officials agreed last fall to drop their opposition to the casino in exchange for at least \$190 million in payments to the county over 20 years to help offset the effects.

"Between us," Sweeney told tribe members, "we're going to live up to the agreement and show we can mitigate the concerns."

Plenty of county residents were on hand to show their support, and Fonseca presented plaques to several volunteers who he said had devoted hundreds of hours to helping the tribe in its outreach to the surrounding community.

Among them was Art Patterson, a volunteer with Ride & Shine, a horseback riding program for people with disabilities. Patterson said he was impressed with the tribe's interest in assisting nonprofit groups in the area.

He was selling tickets for a drawing at the groundbreaking event. The winner, Patterson said, would receive 50 percent of the proceeds, and the remaining 50 percent would be divided between Ride & Shine and the Food Bank of El Dorado County.

Sarah Henjum, another Ride & Shine volunteer, said she lives near the rancheria and initially was concerned that the casino would light up the night sky.

"But they are very environmentally conscious," she said of tribe members.

Galen Schwenk, a Placerville-area resident, said he became a supporter of the casino project after participating in one of several public tours of the rancheria and building site about a year ago.

Schwenk said he patronizes the Jackson Rancheria Casino in Amador County, but he looks forward to having a venue closer to home.

"This is only three miles from where I live -- almost too close," Schwenk said with a chuckle.

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