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Letters : Opinion: Open letter to Chumash: Let's build our future together

Mike Brady

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To the honorable Kenneth Kahn, chairman of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Mission Indians:

As neighbors, in the spirit of community and in anticipation of the resumption of meetings in January between Santa Barbara County and the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Mission Indians, we hope that this is a historic opportunity to build a future for both the tribe and the community as a whole in the Santa Ynez Valley.

Now that H.R. 1157, the federal bill your tribal government advocated for in Congress that would have allowed unrestricted development of the 1,400 acres of agriculturally zoned land known as Camp 4, died when the 114th Congress adjourned, we have our chance to work together to seek a long-term resolution to the inherent land-use conflict between fee-to-trust reservation expansions and the Santa Ynez Valley Community Plan. An agreement that addresses the tribal members' need for housing can, at the same time, preserve the character and values crucial to the survival of the valley.

The Santa Ynez Valley Coalition, a local grassroots organization representing thousands of valley residents, engaged in robust public efforts to communicate our concerns regarding H.R. 1157.

We were heard in the halls of Congress. This threat of potential unrestricted development on the Camp 4 property, and all properties the tribe may choose to add to its sovereign nation in the future, if brought to reality, could have devastating impacts to the economy, environment, water resources and land values in the Santa Ynez Valley, and for its residents and businesses.

Now that we no longer have the imminent threat of congressional action hanging over our heads, let us address the tribe's stated need for 143 homes for tribal members. At the same time, let us address the fiscal impacts to taxpayers resulting from this housing development. And, let us do so in a manner that is sensitive to our agricultural and rural heritage.

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While the tribe contributed to the pre-planning efforts, it declined requests to participate in the development of the Santa Ynez Valley Community Plan, which is the very planning framework that would have been overridden by federal intervention. Today, under new leadership, we invite the tribe to resume working cooperatively with the community and the county.

The tribe is a major property owner in the valley, and clearly shows interest in acquiring additional lands. To address the future of these parcels in piecemeal fashion benefits neither the community nor the tribe. Will our shared, frustrating experience with Camp 4 be repeated time and time again, as each parcel of land the tribe acquires is fought over? Clearly, a comprehensive resolution to these issues is needed.

The community is prepared to work with you to achieve housing for your tribal members. However, we remain staunchly opposed to the fee-to-trust and reservation expansion.

Mr. Chairman, there are good people with good minds in the Santa Ynez Valley and the Chumash tribe. The Santa Ynez Valley is our home, and it is too precious a landscape to be governed by anything less than the best of intentions and values of all residents.

We hope that you will join with us to craft a better and more certain future for the Santa Ynez Valley.

Mike Brady, The author is a spokesperson for the Santa Ynez Valley Coalition.