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Letters : Opinion: Chumash make another run at property tax relief

VOICE FROM LOS OLIVOS: Mike Brady

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An open letter to state Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson:

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The Santa Barbara County government and Santa Ynez Valley residents are making every effort to accommodate the Chumash Tribe's stated objective of 143 houses and a tribal center.

At the same, we hoped that the tribe, as our neighbors, would accept the basics of land use in the Valley and, just as important, agree to pay the costs created by its intended development.

In February, as the county and tribal staffs were discussing ways to resolve the problems generated by the tribe's "fee to trust" plan for Camp 4, the tribe sponsored AB 653 in the California Legislature.

As introduced, the bill freed California tribes from property taxes once an "application" was filed with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to take a property into trust.

If passed, all properties owned by the Chumash tribe "in fee" could potentially be free of property taxes simply by filing an "application" ? in other words, by completing the initial paperwork. This would include not only Camp 4 but potentially all other properties the tribe owns ? about 22 properties in the county with valuations worth hundreds of millions of dollars. The county is currently facing a \$35 million budget deficit.

The language of the bill was amended in committee to free tribal properties from taxes once the BIA issued a "notice of decision" to take a property into trust.

Either way, AB 653 does the same thing ? it gifts the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians property tax relief.

The reason given in the State Analysis to substantiate this bill states, "There is a serious need to build affordable housing for tribal members."

The Chumash tribe is blessed with wealth. They do not need "affordable housing."

The sad thing is that AB 653 will not help the poor tribes. They do not have the property, or the wealth, to take advantage of a law that gives properties going into trust tax relief.

AB 653 is unconstitutional. The state constitution would need to be amended to make it legal.

This bill also waives the requirement that the state is required to reimburse the counties for the tax losses caused by state laws. Under AB 653, county governments will absorb the loss in tax revenues.

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This recent turn of events is deeply disappointing to the members of the Santa Ynez Valley Coalition. We have worked tirelessly to promote the position that we should accommodate the tribe's needs and that it would, in turn, respect the land in the Santa Ynez Valley and pay the costs caused by its development.

Although AB 653 was voted on and passed in the Assembly, it is not yet law. It has a way to go.

We urge you and our other elected state representatives to stop this ill-conceived and onerous legislation.

Mike Brady is a member of the Santa Ynez Valley Coalition. He lives in Los Olivos.

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