

Why Jamul casino is gambling with public's safety

By Dianne Jacob | 4 p.m. Aug. 18, 2016 | Updated , 11:33 a.m. | Aug. 19, 2016



The Hollywood Casino in Jamul is nearly finished. — *Karen Pearlman*

Another casino is about to open in San Diego County, but this one is asking folks to gamble with their lives.

Penn National Gaming, the East Coast firm bankrolling the Hollywood Casino in Jamul, is pitching the place palace worthy of the Las Vegas Strip.

But Jamul is not Vegas. It's not Tinsel Town. The casino, with its big, garish "Hollywood" sign out front, is a s community that has fought for decades to stay as rural as possible.

Shoehorned onto a tiny sliver of land along a windy, two-lane highway, the giant gaming hall is setting the s

Driving rural State Route 94 can be deadly. Since 2005, according to the California Highway Patrol, there ha collisions on the highway, from Rancho San Diego through Jamul. Hundreds of people have been injured. T

Much of the road has the lowest Caltrans safety rating possible — an F. Since 2014, nearly 50 collisions hav the part of SR-94 near the casino construction site.

Locals already consider the road a deathtrap. Now comes the casino, which is expected to add 9,000 daily c

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area. That's a 50 percent jump over today.

Who's to blame for this Hollywood horror show?

I blame the leadership of the Jamul Indian Village. No one can fault them for wanting to improve their economy when other options were raised over the years, like possibly working with another tribe to develop an alternative. The Indians balked.

I blame Penn National. The massive building is in a terrible location, and Penn is trying to put lipstick on this to cash in big time, and to heck with the community.

My biggest beef right now is with the state. State officials are failing to do their most important job — protect Caltrans is allowing the casino to open without all the needed traffic improvements in place. That includes new walls and signals at critical highway intersections, including the one next to a fire station.

Making matters worse, the state Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control is allowing the casino to serve alcohol before completion of all the road improvements and before a public hearing on the liquor permit.

This, on a highway that has seen nearly 100 DUI-related collisions in the past decade.

It took other Indian casinos, including Sycuan and Barona, many years to get liquor licenses. The Jamul casino took 12 months, despite fierce opposition from the county and the Sheriff's Department, along with formal protests from the people.

Hollywood Casino isn't even open yet, and the state is helping Penn National and the Jamul Indian Village at the expense of public safety.

I've talked with state officials in recent days and here's what I said: I intend to hold them responsible for their actions that will likely lead to injury or loss of life after the casino opens.

I don't want blood on my hands. I'm sure they don't either.

There's still time to make things right. I urge the state to rescind the alcohol permit, hold a public hearing and ensure critical road improvements are in place before the casino opens.

Here's the nightmare scenario I worry about most: A big wildfire breaks out in our backcountry and, with the wind aggressively pushes west. At the same time, a collision occurs on this rural highway. SR-94 turns into a parking lot. Folks in the casino's gaming halls and bars can't get out.

I'm not talking about a Hollywood movie. I'm talking about a real "Perfect Storm."

This casino represents a clear and present danger to the community. State officials need to step up, do their job and put safety first.

Jacob is vice-chairwoman, San Diego County Board of Supervisors.

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