

Group seeks Indian equity

One Nation United says tribes should observe U.S. laws, regulations

By Eric Leach
Staff Writer

After decades of fighting in obscurity, a Thousand Oaks woman says her battle to bring Indian tribes under the same laws and regulations as the rest of the country is growing into a united front — thanks in part to California's heated recall election and a new focus on Indian gaming.

Barb Lindsay, the new national director of One Nation United, says her group now has more than 300,000 members in all 50 states, including homeowner associations, local government agencies and trade groups.

One Nation United seeks standard tax laws and regulations across the United States to even the playing field between Indian tribes and non-Indian businesses.

"We were a voice in the wilderness back in 1982 when I first got involved in these issues in the state of Washington. Then it was tribal land claims, and decisions awarding the tribes rights for taking salmon and steelhead. It pretty much wiped out the commercial fishing industry," said Lindsay.

"But especially in the last few years I've seen the momentum shifting in public sentiment since Arnold Schwarzenegger ran for governor and said he wanted operators of Indian casinos to pay a 'fair share' of their revenues to help support the state."

While Lindsay and her supporters see it as a matter of fairness, Indian gaming officials say their tribes are sovereign entities and negotiated their tax arrangements in exhaustive treaties with the U.S. government.

Businesses like casinos are allowing some tribes to make long-overdue contributions to the well-being of their members and to communities across America, they say.

"We're taking care of our own and taking care of our friends and neighbors," said Ernie Stevens Jr., chairman of the National Indian Gaming Association. "We're providing jobs, good health care, good benefits. The success and prosperity of Indian gaming doesn't stop at the reservation boundaries or with the color of our skin."

He said there are 500,000 people working for tribal casinos nationwide, and 75 percent of those employees are not Indians.

"Tribes are governments like states," he said. "You don't tax states because you don't tax governments. What people have to understand is that we have been sovereign since long before the United States Constitution. We always were and always will be sovereign governments."

But Lindsay said the advantage is unfair and harmful to thousands of businesses.

"I represent the folks who are being put out of business because they can't compete with the tax-free businesses. And sales taxes are a major component of the income base of many local governments."

Lindsay says she has been traveling across the country for years, addressing community groups, citizen forums, meeting with local government officials and trade groups, and generally trying to educate people about



Tina Burrows/Photographer

Barb Lindsay of Thousand Oaks is the new national director of One Nation United, which seeks to bring Indian tribes under United States laws.

In the past two years, she said, the political climate has changed dramatically, particularly in California when Gov. Schwarzenegger got involved in the casino issue.

She was a 31-year-old mother of two elementary school-age daughters when she became a campaign volunteer in the late 1970s in a school board race in Bellevue, Wash.

She used that political experience to lobby in the 1980s for the Northwest Sport Fishing Industry Association against some of the special fishing rights given to Indian tribes.

She then formed United Property Owners in 1989, which grew in membership from several hundred to nearly 100,000 by the mid-1990s. That group merged this year with One Nation, a group with similar interests.

Lyle Beckwith, senior vice president of government relations for the National Association of Convenience Stores, said Lindsay has been instrumental in calling attention to questions about the fairness of policies toward tribal businesses.

picked up increasing momentum in the past five years. This issue is coming to a head, in large part because of Barb's efforts," Beckwith said.

"We feel that because of tribal sovereignty tribes have been able to sell cigarettes and motor fuels without collecting state taxes," he said. "Barb's organization has been working toward the same goals."

Dan Gilligan, president of the Petroleum Marketers Association of America, said his group is also a member of One Nation United because of shared concerns.

"Barb is one of these high-energy, driven people who is passionate about her goals and objectives and makes things happen," he said.

But Suzette Brewer, director of public relations for the National Indian Gaming Association, said Indian businesses, including gaming, have provided benefits to tribes that have suffered in poverty for years.

"It's treaty law, not a special privilege. It's something the U.S. government agreed to when the tribes gave up their land," she said.