

Area tribes discuss political '07 outlook

By: EDWARD SIFUENTES - Staff Writer

PECHANGA INDIAN RESERVATION ---- American Indian tribes could benefit from the new Democratic leadership in Congress, in legislative efforts ranging from gambling to social services, consultants told tribal leaders this week at a casino conference at the Pechanga Resort & Casino.

Democrats won the majority in both chambers of Congress during November's midterm elections. That means that many allies of Indian tribes now head powerful committees in the House and Senate, said Tom Rogers, a tribal lobbyist with Carlyle Consulting.

"We are immensely powerful right now," Rogers told tribal leaders gathered at a workshop on Washington, D.C., politics. "We've never had the power we have."

More than 600 people, including tribal leaders, casino representatives and vendors, gathered at the 12th annual Western Indian Gaming Conference earlier this week. The event was sponsored by the California Nations Indian Gaming Association, which represents 68 tribes and acts as a planning and coordinating agency for legislative, policy, legal and communications efforts on behalf of its members.

Tribes had a tough legislative year in 2006, fighting back efforts that would encroach on their sovereignty and businesses, consultants said.

Last year, tribes narrowly averted a federal bill that would have prohibited tribes from building casinos off their traditional lands. The bill's author, Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Tracy, was among those defeated by Democrats in the midterm elections.

Pombo said last year that he wanted to stop "reservation shopping," a term used to describe proposals to build casinos far from a tribe's traditional lands. He blamed the bill's failure on Democrats, some of whom criticized it as an intrusion on the sovereignty of tribes.

Tribes are now pushing for a wide range of changes, including a bill that would allow them to issue bonds to fund tribal governments and tribal businesses, Rogers said. If enacted, the legislation would allow tribal governments to use tax-exempt debt to build convention centers, hotels and golf courses.

Other consultants said Thursday that despite the Democrats' narrow gains, tribal leaders will need to work with lawmakers from both parties to move their legislative agenda forward.

"We're going to have to continue to work both sides of the aisle on our tribal issues," said Holly Cook Macarro, a tribal consultant and a workshop panelist. "As we all know, tribal issues are generally bipartisan."

At another workshop, analysts told tribal leaders that funding research could help highlight to the public and local governments the benefit their businesses have on neighboring communities, such as employment opportunities, increased tax revenues and purchases from local vendors.

"This information is used with the media on a regular basis, to focus on the jobs that are created and the general economic impact that the tribes' operations, not just casinos" have on communities, said G. David Huntoon, a researcher with The Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College in suburban Los Angeles.

The conference ends today with a meeting among members of the gambling association.

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