

Editorial: Cost of winning clout in Congress? About half a million

Staff Reports

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The 1st Congressional District, represented in Washington by Doug LaMalfa, is a contender for the district in California with the largest population of American Indians. It has more than 20 reservations and rancherias, as well as thousands of members of tribes that lack federal recognition, mainly Wintu.

The North State's Indians face a variety of challenges involving the federal government: stalled drives to win federal recognition, the Redding Rancheria's attempt to bring new land into trust, the Karuk Tribe's efforts to restore fisheries in the Klamath River. If the congressman wanted to use his authority to help resolve these legally difficult and frequently controversial questions, it would be to his credit.

And indeed LaMalfa last week introduced a bill in Congress to resolve a long-standing dispute, this over a tribe's attempt to expand its sovereign trust property. The funny part is, this dispute is taking place hundreds of miles away from LaMalfa's district.

In Santa Barbara County, the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians wants to expand its reservation with a new piece of land near Buellton. The tribe says it urgently needs the land to provide housing for its members, though the loss of local control over land-use decisions has provoked neighbors' opposition. The Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors recently voted 4-1 to oppose the tribe's expansion.

Enter LaMalfa. His bill would override local opposition, and bypass the Bureau of Indian Affairs' notoriously labyrinthine process, to expand the tribe's territory.

The measure is co-sponsored, LaMalfa's spokesman correctly stresses, by all of the California members of the House Subcommittee on Indian and Alaska Native Affairs, Democrats and Republicans alike — though it is opposed by Rep. Lois Capps, who actually represents Santa Barbara County in Congress.

Now, reverse the roles and imagine how Shasta County residents would react to such an intervention from a SoCal liberal. It wouldn't be pretty. So why would a congressman reach halfway across the state to meddle in an arcane local controversy?

His office noted that it's a long-festering dispute — the subject of a House subcommittee hearing last year — and he just wants to cut through the federal bureaucracy for the tribe. Of course, LaMalfa wasn't even in Congress for that hearing.

Yet it's hard not to notice that the Santa Ynez Band — which owns a very successful casino — is also one of the biggest spenders in California politics. The tribe hasn't showered donations on LaMalfa, per se, but did spend \$455,800 on state-level campaign donations last year alone. For perspective, that's 10 times the state campaign spending of the Redding Rancheria — more money than mighty Sierra Pacific Industries spent.

Hey, the Indians have suffered one kick after another since Europeans arrived on this continent. If a tribe suddenly enjoys the influence corporate tycoons long have, more power to the long-suffering Natives.

But for those of any background wondering how to get members of Congress interested in your cause, apparently the starting price runs six figures.



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