

Hundreds Gather for 25th Annual Western Indian Gaming Conference CNIGA Announces Support for California Sports Betting Initiative

Celebrating a quarter century, more than 450 tribal leaders, regulators, industry professionals and policy experts gathered at the 25th annual Western Indian Gaming Conference (WIGC) at Sycuan Casino Resort for a series of speeches, workshops, and a tradeshow. The WIGC was held February 11-13, 2020.

The WIGC and tradeshow has proven to be one of the most informative conferences in Indian Country and features the annual State of the Tribal Nations Address during the General Session that kicks off the conference.

This year, the State of the Tribal Nations was delivered by newly elected CNIGA Chairman James Siva. Chairman Siva touted the positive economic aspects of Indian gaming and cited the openings of multiple new tribal gaming facilities, as well as multiple expansions of existing facilities, including the \$226 million hotel and casino expansion at the event's host, the Sycuan Casino Resort. Siva cited figures from the state Employment Development Department, reporting that tribal government gaming employs 66,000 Californians, an increase of 3,000 jobs from last year.

Regarding policy issues, Siva announced CNIGA support for the sports wagering initiative that was spearheaded by a coalition of tribes that seeks to legalize the practice at the state's brick-and-mortar tribal casinos as well as licensed horse racetracks. Siva said that this initiative was a "responsible" way to expand gaming in California.



CNIGA Chairman James Siva

Photo: Michael Burke

"Strong public policy and responsible government gaming are driving factors in Indian Country," said Siva. "It is for this reason that I am honored to announce that the California Nations Indian Gaming Association has officially endorsed the tribal initiative to legalize sports wagering."

Though there has been discussion about permitting the practice of online gaming, Siva warned that this was not wise policy – citing fears of problem gambling proliferation, underage gambling, and threats to established brick and mortar facilities, which many

rural California communities rely on as economic engines.

In a separate forum later in the General Session, host tribe Sycuan Chairman Cody Martinez said of the sports betting initiative that tribes had built a strong industry and that they were not going to run something out without deliberation and discussion. "We take this seriously," said Martinez. "We're not here to make a quick buck, but rather to build and sustain our communities."

In a later seminar on sports betting, Steve Bodmer, the General Counsel for the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians, one of the tribes that spearheaded the sports wagering initiative, emphasized how he sees the initiative as a responsible expansion of gaming by pointing out several "safety measures" embedded within the initiative.

These measures include excluding California college teams to allowable betting, forbidding marketing on sports wagering to those under 21, having consumer protections and anti-corruptions measures including a private right of action, or allowable lawsuits for violations as well as ensuring that slot-like random number generating machines do not go beyond tribal government facilities.

Bodmer also touched on why sports wagering would be a poor fit for the state's private card rooms pointing out that those facilities have been poorly regulated by the state of California despite receiving major fines from the federal government.

"California card rooms have paid more in FinCEN (The Financial Crimes Enforcement Network) fines than any other industry in the entire United States," said Bodmer.



The Western Indian Gaming Conference tradeshow floor. Photo: Michael Burke

Chairman Siva also touched on the issue of for-profit commercial card rooms, increasingly offering games that violate the California Constitution. He also noted the disparity between payments to problem gaming made by tribes versus other gaming entities in California.

“Through our compacts, tribal governments contribute \$8.2 million a year to the California Department of Health for the prevention and treatment of problem gambling. I would be remiss if I didn’t mention what other gaming entities in California contribute on an annual basis. The state lottery contributes only \$139,000. California cardrooms pay a mere \$189,000 per year. Let me state that again, \$189,000 per year from an industry that is currently touting economic activity of \$5 billion, yes billion.”

Attendees also attended various seminars and workshops focusing on tribal governmental issues, casino operations and security, regulation, finance, and also a series that, with state bar approval, counts toward the 25 hours of minimum continuing legal education requirements (MCLE) that the State of California requires of attorneys to complete every three years.

An awards luncheon was also held in which CNIGA

presented annual awards in tribal gaming leadership as well as recognition to those who have championed tribal sovereignty from within the gaming industry. This year, former Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians Chairman Dr. Anthony Pico, a nationally recognized tribal and gaming industry leader who has received numerous awards and distinctions for his achievements in both business and his humanitarian work, was the recipient of the Anna Sandoval Leadership Award. Jodi DiLascio of BMM Testlabs was recognized with the Pauline Murillo Industry Leader Award.

For the second year, CNIGA also awarded scholarships to deserving Native students. This year’s winners were Juliette Jackson, Klamath Tribes who received the CNIGA Annual Seven Generations Scholarship Award and Niya Henry, Navajo Nation, who was the recipient of the CNIGA Annual Journalism Scholarship Award. ♣

For more information about the California Nations Indian Gaming Association (CNIGA), visit www.cniga.com. A transcript of the State of the Tribal Nations address can be obtained at cniga.com/press-releases.

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