

Viejas taps top firm as designer for casino/resort

by Onell R. Soto - CNS

ALPINE, Calif. - The designer of the Bellagio, Wynn and other huge casino resorts has been chosen to design the \$800 million Viejas casino-hotel resort.

Las Vegas-based Marnell Corrao Associates will present concept drawings of the proposed resort later this year, and the public will have a chance to comment before the plans are finalized, a Viejas spokesman said.

Neighbors have said they're worried about how the proposed resort would affect traffic and water.

Viejas announced in August that it planned to build a second casino, a large hotel and other amenities on its east San Diego County reservation, which is just north of Interstate 8.

"We are visionary people," said Charlie Brown, the tribe's community relations director. "We're looking at a long-term investment in this. This is going to be a statement."

The details of the expansion, as well as how the tribe will finance it, are still being worked out.

The hotel, for instance, could be larger than the 600 rooms the tribe had initially said, and the size of the casino, previously announced as 2,500 slots, is not final, Brown said.

"We're still in the design stage," Brown said. "We have no idea what it's going to look like yet."

He said the project is expected to be completed by 2012.

Viejas has hired the company that includes the Mirage, Caesar's Palace and New York-New York resorts in its design portfolio, said gambling industry expert David Schwartz of the University of Nevada Las Vegas.

"They're going to get something that's just as sophisticated as the stuff that's going up on the Strip," he said. "Generally speaking, they don't do stuff on the cheap."

The proposal at Viejas comes as several other San Diego County casinos, including Pauma and Valley View in north San Diego County, are planning to open hotels.

Meanwhile, Sycuan, which in February won voter approval for a new casino, has not announced expansion plans. A small hotel proposed for the Golden Acorn Casino on the Campo reservation is on hold because of the economy, a tribal leader said.

Scores of workers were laid off earlier this year at Viejas' 2,500-slot casino. Many other local casinos said attendance and spending dipped as the result of economic anxiety and high gas prices.

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