

Cervantes cocks his ear to Southeast Inyo

Residents meet new supervisor, who says previous county administration may have made springs situation look worse than it really was

By Robin Flinchum

Register Correspondent

Transportation of nuclear waste along California State Route 127, the proposed Yucca Mountain Repository and the Tecopa Hot Springs Park were the top issues of concern to some 30 Southeast Inyo County residents who turned out to meet with their newly elected Fifth District Supervisor Richard Cervantes on Thursday. After eating lunch with other seniors in the Tecopa Senior lunch program, Cervantes spent more than two hours answering questions and addressing local concerns at the Tecopa Community Center.

Cervantes said he has been invited by the Department of Energy to come to Washington and participate in discussions about the proposed Yucca Mountain Nuclear Repository and was looking for input from affected southeast Inyo County residents. Many of those in attendance expressed concerns about the ongoing transport of low-level waste over State Route 127, a two-line highway that passes very near Tecopa and right through the towns of Shoshone and Death Valley Junction.

Corbin Harney, Western Shoshone elder and environmental spokesperson, asked Cervantes to carry a very clear message to Washington: "I want you to tell them they are liars,"



Fifth District Inyo County Supervisor Richard Cervantes addresses some of his Southeast Inyo constituents at the Tecopa Community Center last Thursday. It was Cervantes' first opportunity to meet with residents as their newly-elected supervisor. *Photo by Robin Flinchum*

Harney said at the meeting. "I want you to find out if you can get an answer to who owns the land (Yucca Mountain). They didn't buy it from the nature. We didn't sell it, because we didn't own it. Find out, why are they destroying the Mother, the only Mother we have? Tell them to put their stuff in Washington where they can watch it real close."

Cervantes said he shared some of the views expressed by Harney and others. "Some of this waste has a half-life of 24,000 years. I think it's a little presumptuous of man to think we could design something that will last 24,000 years," he said. "It kind of goes against my grain to take our mess and bury it in the ground like that."

The other issue of concern was the recent transition of the management of the Tecopa Hot Springs Park from the county to a private concessionaire called California Land Management.

Several local residents as well as winter-only (or snowbird) users of the park expressed their dissatisfaction with the new arrangement, while others defended CLM and commended the clean-up and repair efforts the company has made to date.

Of greatest concern to most was the issue of possibly transferring management of the park to the local community. Brad Goans, spokesperson for the Friends of Tecopa, outlined his group's plan to submit a proposal to the Inyo County Board of Supervisors asking that the contract with CLM be terminated and the management be put in the hands of the local group. "The current contract has a 30-day out clause for either the county or CLM for any reason," Goans said. "We also have many concerns about the legality of how this was done." Goans and other members of the Friends of Tecopa will be circulating petitions in

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 support of their proposal and hope to present it to the supervisors in a matter of weeks.

Jennifer Viereck, of Hummingbird Family Resources, a group that contended with CLM for local management of the springs when the county put out its original request for proposals, said that she understood the Hummingbird was passed over because "we couldn't do certain repairs. But then CLM was n't required to do them either. We had people standing by with hammers ready to make the place ADA compliant within the first three months."

Cervantes promised bath users he would look into issues of noncompliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The pools, according to local users, were never put into compliance during the county's term of management and it was understood that CLM would correct this. So far, users complain, no efforts have been made in this direction.

Cervantes said he supported the community's right to self determination but that "the county is now committed to a contract with CLM and they don't take that lightly." Any change in that arrangement, he said, "is going to be difficult."

"The board would seriously consider it if all risks to the county could be eliminated," he said about the Friends

group's proposal. This would include the hot button of liability and insurance, one of the main reasons the county chose to go with CLM. "CLM provides insurance, employees and a great amount of working capital behind them that the county can rely on. I don't think (revenue) is the big issue or the county wouldn't have given it to CLM for \$125 a month."

Cervantes said he was unconvinced that the county's previous claims that the park was running at a burdensome financial deficit were accurate. "I met with the county employee's union representative," Cervantes said, "and he showed me in black and white where they had padded the records to justify their desire to hand it off."

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Cervantes said, "and he showed me in black and white where they had padded the records to justify their desire to hand it off." The previous administration, said Cervantes, had "ignored it so long they built up a huge deferred maintenance problem."

Several of those in attendance thanked Cervantes for making the trip and taking an interest in their views. Cervantes said he intends to make Tecopa "a regular stop" in order to keep in touch with the residents in this part of the county.