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EDITORIALS

Stacked deck

Casino-owning tribes have shown how their hefty political donations can trump nonprofit competition.

WHEN CHARITIES went up against casino-owning Indian tribes in Sacramento recently, they got schooled in who wields the real political power. The outcome raises serious questions about whether Californians meant to forever guarantee tribes that there would be no meaningful competition to their gambling operations.

A bill by Sen. Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) to allow nonprofit fundraisers to install electronic bingo machines was dropped right after tribes went to work against it, protesting that it would violate a pact with the state giving them the sole right to slot machines. Then, in the waning days of the legislative session, Sen. Gil Cedillo (D-Los Angeles) gutted a bill on school lunches and amended it to specifically forbid anyone besides the tribes from owning gambling machines.

Most gaming tribes gave their stamp of approval to the bill — which also contained a sop to big charities by allowing them to increase their bingo prizes and link bingo players at separate venues via video — and within two weeks of the new language's introduction, so did

the Legislature.

It's more than a little troubling to see the haste with which lawmakers, who receive huge donations from tribes, rush to do their bidding. The state had been in the process of determining the legality of charity bingo machines, but Cedillo's bill would end that discussion. Californians should demand to see it reopened.

At the time the gaming pacts were made, bingo machines weren't commonly available. Now that they are, it raises the question of whether any new technological advances in gambling that represent competition to Indian tribes will be banned. If so, the state first needs an open and public debate on the issue, not a quickly packaged and wrapped gift to Indian gaming.

Whatever our pretensions might be to keeping a tight lid on gambling in California, the horse is long out of the casino. By now, so many venues offer gambling of so many kinds that they are continually accusing each other of having unfair competitive advantages — an issue that charities brought up because Indian gaming has diminished their bingo operations.

Through the state gaming pacts, Indian casinos pay \$100 million a year to the state. In addition, the tribes have donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to legislators this year alone. California has just gotten a disturbing demonstration of the clout such sums can buy.