

Riverside County supervisors say they can't intervene in Colorado River land dispute

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Close to 50 people upset about a land dispute with the Colorado River Indian Tribes showed up Tuesday to ask Riverside County supervisors to intervene, only to be told the county has no jurisdiction.

In recent weeks, the tribe has posted trespass and eviction notices on the homes of more than 100 leaseholders on the western bank of the Colorado River between Parker, Ariz., and Blythe.

A dispute over who actually owns the 30-mile strip of land dates to 1873, when a presidential executive order set the reservation boundaries. A 1969 decision shifted control of the western shore to the tribes, known as the CRIT, adding it to the rest of the tribe's 475-square-mile reservation in Arizona. A string of court cases have been fought in the past two decades, and many residents have refused to make lease payments during that time.

Efforts by the CRIT to enforce lease payments, by threatening evictions, have taken place periodically. Unlike previous instances, residents said, Riverside County sheriff's deputies have not stepped in to mitigate the actions this time.

Members of Colorado River Residents for Justice told supervisors Tuesday that tensions are high.

Steve Adler, 53, a former Mira Loma resident who now lives in Gilbert, Ariz., said the county needs to "put a lid on what is an explosive situation and act immediately. We've got to have law enforcement protection."

Assistant County Counsel Katherine Lind told Adler and other lease holders that the county's hands are tied.

"It's tribal land as far as we're concerned," Lind said. "That area has been in dispute. There has been no decision to date indicating that is not part of the tribal reservation."

The county's role, Lind said, is "essentially none." Any jurisdictional action, she said, would result in "embroiling the county in a big lawsuit."

Tim Moore, an attorney, is a lease holder in the disputed area. He has represented his river neighbors in several lawsuits.

Speaking to the residents after the meeting, Moore said, “The county is assuming it’s tribal land. There’s no legal basis for that. We will get on the agenda next time and we’ll explore that argument, which I believe is being done for political reasons.”

Before the meeting, Christin Johnson, whose father owns the Water Wheel Resort on the river, said she was hoping the board could provide some help.

“We would like them to protect us until this jurisdictional boundary is resolved,” Johnson said.

Later, she said she was not surprised by the board’s reaction.

“Once again, they’re trying to put it off on some other department,” she said, referring to the federal courts. “It’s typically what we get.”

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