

Calif. bill will give tribes more protection over sacred sites
By CHRIS T. NGUYEN

The Associated Press
LOS ANGELES

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on Thursday signed a bill that will give American Indian tribes more protection over their sacred sites on public land, allowing them to buy property and shield it from development.

Tribes praised the decision and said it was a victory in a battle to preserve cultural resources.

The bill, which becomes effective March 1 and extends to both federally recognized and unrecognized tribes, also requires local governments to notify tribes about possible future development.

"It's a step in the right direction," said James Ramos, treasurer and cultural awareness coordinator for the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians. "It doesn't stop the construction, but it gives us a say."

The bill introduced by Sen. John Burton, D-San Francisco, was one of the Legislature's most divisive and took lawmakers and lobbyists nearly two years to reach an accord since it was introduced in December 2002.

Attempts to pass a similar bill failed. Former Gov. Gray Davis had vetoed a bill that would have given tribes authority to block development on both private and public land near their sacred sites.

In the Burton bill, California tribes had wanted tighter restrictions on development on public land containing sacred cultural resources, while developers, businesses and local governments worried about burdensome regulations.

Negotiations escalated into a bitter debate tribes alleged racism and insensitivity to their issues, and lobbyists complained casino-rich tribes were exerting undue influence.

The bill, which the Legislature passed in August, will require local governments to notify tribes when they change their development plan and gives tribes 60 days to say whether the plan would harm any sacred sites.

Tribes also will be allowed to buy public land and put it under cultural easements that will shield it from development, similar to conservation easements that environmental groups use to preserve land.

Rob Wood, environmental specialist for the California Native American Heritage Commission, said Thursday the new law will help tribes preserve their land, artifacts and sacred sites, but it does not provide additional protections on private land.