

GAMBLING WITH THE FUTURE

coastal community divided over a new casino and its potential impact on their children's future

story and photos by Jasmine Pittenger



Drive out from Florence on Highway 126 toward Eugene, and all will seem soft, hushed, peaceful. The Siuslaw River is a wide silvery plain at this point, and mist rises sleepily from the river into the pine-carpeted hills. A tender rain patters against the windshield of your car, and all is softness and blurry edges.

It's low tide, and a little girl in a pink jacket stomps across the mud flats beside the river, boots squelching in the muck, pants rolled up above her knees. Behind her comes her watchful father, clamdigging bucket in hand. It's a scene that takes you back in time, one that may make you think, if you're so inclined, "What a great place to raise kids."

But before you reach the clamdigging flats, you might notice two warring signs. First, to the right, there's a red sign with big white letters. Blotting out a big chunk of the scenic river behind it, the sign reads, "NO CASINO," then, in smaller letters, "PACT legal fund — CONTRIBUTE NOW." (As we go to press the "NO CASINO" sign at this site has been taken down.)

Before you've had the chance to take that in, your car has carried you to the next sign, this time on the left. This one says, "YES CASINO" and then, in medium-sized letters, "Coming Soon."

After 10 years of planning — and nearly as many years of controversy — the one thing that no longer seems to be in question is that a casino has indeed arrived in this town of 7,500 inhabitants. A 16,000 sq.ft. tent housing the casino's 268 slot machines and six blackjack tables sprawls behind a fringe of evergreen trees near the highway. The casino is opening for business this week, and it is called the Three Rivers Casino, in honor of the rivers — the Coos, Umpqua and Siuslaw — that bear the names of three local American Indian tribes.

For some local residents, the casino is a long-awaited dream come true; for others, it's a nightmare. And concerns about children come up on both sides of the issue.

For the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw, who are building the casino, it represents a chance to provide their children — and their children's children — with a future. About a third of the tribes' population is under age 18, says Dr. Lorre Lewis, the tribes' associate director for special programs, and poverty, drug and alcohol abuse and diabetes are all afflictions that plague the tribes. The answers to these problems, say tribal administrators, are prevention, employment opportunities, a sense of pride and accomplishment and, above all, education — the earlier, the better.

But the power to get an education, and to choose the kind of education their members receive, has not always been in the hands of the tribes. Since the 1850s — when members of the tribes were marched at gunpoint to an internment camp at Yachats, where half or more of them died of starvation and disease — several other generations have systematically been taken away from their families, tribes and culture. Indian Training Schools were one way this was done.

"My grandfather went to Chemawa Indian School in Salem," says Bob Garcia, economic development director for the tribes and a tribal member himself. "They were told how to act, what to value and not value. My grandfather ran away more than once from the school. It was an institution designed to break down the culture."

Today tribal members are widely dispersed, another result of the tribes' repeated removal from their land. The tribes currently provide services to members in five Oregon counties, with the greatest number living in Coos County.

At the Learning Center run by the Confederated Tribes in Coos Bay, some of the lost knowledge is being restored to the tribes' youngest members. Children who participate in the after-school program also get help with their homework, as

well as one-on-one time with the Learning Center teachers — important in families where single parents, and sometimes single grandparents, are taking care of several young children.

In the bright, primary-colored Siuslaw Room at the Learning Center, 7-year-old Eagle, a small boy with big eyes who is part Coos and part Thai, pulls a spelling test out of his Jurassic Park backpack. He's excited to show his after-school program teachers that he's gotten a good grade. Eagle has forgotten the "a" in "because," but has aced a long list of other words: "buck, but, cut, hug, rug, duck, buy ..." Glossy-haired, round-cheeked 6-year-old Ariana looks on, her bright, dark eyes at attention.

"Even if we just get them used to doing their homework, that's important," says Nancy Caffey, Learning Center coordinator. "Even if we do nothing else but educate the little guys that their futures depend on a quality education...you just need to plant the seed."

Caffey has noticed changes in several children in the year that the Learning Center has been operating. In the beginning, one of the girls was mad all the time. "You couldn't touch her or hug her. Now you can." And one of the boys was flunking most of his spelling tests before starting the program; with coaching from his after-school teachers, his scores got much better.

"My thought for the Learning Center is that we can really help the young tribal members to meet their dreams," says Lewis.

The push to educate younger members of the tribe doesn't stop when they graduate from high school; the tribe is currently paying for more than 20 members to go to college. But funding is tight, and the tribes are not able to pay for as much of their members' education as they would like.

"That is definitely one place where the tribe is going to want to put some of the money from the casino: Making education available to more members of the tribe," Lewis continues. "If we did not have the casino coming online, we would be looking at a reduction in services in the next three to five years."

Initiatives such as the Learning Center and educational scholarships can help children from the tribes to rise above what, for too many families, has become a vicious cycle of poverty, lack of education and unemployment. Tribal members point out that helping families leave poverty behind is good — not just for the families themselves, but for the community as a whole.

A house with a picket fence in Florence has a flock of fluttering chickens in the yard, and 8-year-old Dylan Dewberry is getting an education of his own. Dylan's mother, Susie Dewberry, is president of a local organization called PACT (People Against a Casino Town), which has twice initiated lawsuits over the Confederated Tribes' right to build and operate a casino in Florence.

Like Eagle Roy back at the tribes' Learning Center, Dylan is all big, eager eyes under his bowl-cut brown bangs. He scampers forward on long, coltish legs to show off a helicopter he's made out of Legos.

It's quite a leap from Legos to lobbying the governor, but Dylan has made that leap. An e-mail he sent to Gov. Ted Kulongoski last December reads:

This is our town. We will not give up until we are Sure the casino is out ... 126 is a very dangerous road. The casino will make more cars com. [sic]

Susie Dewberry is a former Florence schoolteacher who home-schools her two young sons in their house, which is off North Fork Road — the road that, for a short length of asphalt, will connect Highway 126 to the casino. When Dewberry first got involved in PACT in March, 2003, the organization consisted of a group of women sitting around a table at the library.