

Creeks' new casino hotel changes Atmore landscape

ATMORE, Ala. (AP)—A 17-story casino hotel being built by the Poarch Band of Creek Indians rises out of the rolling farmlands and pine forests of south Alabama, an eye-catching tower for the stream of travelers on Interstate 65.

To make sure drivers don't miss the casino exit, a 65-foot-high electronic sign will beckon them to the site, which tribal leaders hope will gain a reputation as a destination resort.

The casino is to be filled with 1,600 electronic bingo games in halls enlivened by the flashing lights and ringing bells of a Las Vegas-style gambling palace. But that kind of high-stakes gambling still isn't allowed in Alabama—on or off tribal land, at least not yet—a divisive issue for years between state officials and Alabama's only federally recognized American Indian tribe.

Still, the hotel's gleaming glass tower looming over the rural landscape has raised expectations that the tribe's invest-

ment will pay off.

"Atmore now has a skyline," said real estate agent Ann Gordon, whose office is near the hotel. "It's hard for a small town to change. But we will see a lot of growth."

She said she expects the tribe's Wind Creek Casino & Hotel and a city-owned business park planned across Highway 21 from the hotel will create the type of interstate-exit growth familiar around the United States.

"Poarch Creeks' businesses have provided economic stability to both our tribal members and our neighbors. We have grown to be the largest employer in the county and a major employer in the state," said Creek Chairman Buford L. Rolin.

Lumber dealer David Swift Sr. said Atmore will still have its rural roots, a slow-paced lifestyle, built around farming, livestock, timber and two state prisons, but he expects the area

around the casino will become a large commercial center, extending its reach into the town about four miles away.

For some, the development hasn't been a plus.

John Spence, who has operated Dixie Catfish Shack for 11 years at a site about a mile from the hotel, said the increased traffic on the highway during construction hasn't helped his restaurant.

But he wasn't sure why. He said his business may have been hurt by high gas prices and the slumping economy or "it could be people gambling" their money away.

"I hope it picks up," he said.

The existing Creek gaming center, which has been a smaller scale bingo operation for years, offers dining. But the new hotel's planned 300-seat restaurant will be a bigger competitor with its expansive buffet and a separate 84-seat upscale dining room.

"You can't have something that big without making a major impact on a small town our size," said Mayor Howard Shell. But he

expects the increased number of casino customers to provide a lot of economic "fringe benefits" to the city's restaurants and other businesses.

In Mobile, a legal dispute also has implications for the gambling future of the Creeks, a tribe of about 2,600 that gained its federal recognition in 1984. The Poarch Creeks are descendants of a segment of the original Creek Nation, which once covered almost all of Alabama and Georgia.

Alabama Attorney General Troy King has a suit pending in U.S. District Court in Mobile seeking to strike down regulations that allow the U.S. Department of Interior and American Indian tribes to bypass a state's refusal to negotiate a compact for casino-style gaming. The Creeks' lawyers have asked that the suit be dismissed.

A Texas case with similar issues also has been litigated and awaits a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that might affect the Ala-

bama tribe.

The legal battle hasn't stopped the Creeks from replacing their old Creek Bingo Palace with the multimillion-dollar high-rise and planning a sister hotel on tribal land at Wetumpka, near Montgomery, where the tribe operates another electronic bingo casino.

The new Atmore casino on a 35-acre site is expected to open in January, followed by the 236-room hotel in February. A water feature—a small lake—is expected to be completed in June, the final stage of the opening. An amphitheater with seating for 2,000 is planned at the water's edge.

The Memphis, Tenn.-based Flintco Constructive Services, a privately held American Indian-owned company, is building the hotel in partnership with Martin Construction Inc. in Atmore.

Creek Indian Enterprises construction manager Jim Angus said the project has created about 350 construction jobs.

When completed, some 750 workers are expected to operate the complex, working three shifts around the clock.

Latoya Williams-Staples, who works in the casino, said she expects business will pick up because the hotel will be visible "up and down" the interstate. The complex is about 50 miles from both Mobile and Pensacola, Fla.

"It's a great opportunity for Atmore," she said.

A manufacturing city split by railroad tracks and home to two state prisons, Atmore has seen its population shrink from 8,046 in 1990 to 7,427 in 2007, as residents relocated for jobs. Hurricane Ivan's tornadoes ripped through here in 2004, but repairs have given the city a spruced-up look.

"Everybody is excited about the hotel. It will put Atmore on the map," said Freddie Hobbs, 56, a lifelong resident. "It will help keep young people around."

State appeals dismissal of its casino case

KANSAS CITY, Kan. (AP)—Kansas has formally appealed a federal judge's order dismissing the state's challenge of a casino in Kansas City, Kan.

The move on Friday sets the stage for another review by the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver. Last fall, the appellate court panel, citing technical grounds, dismissed the state's lawsuit that challenges the legality of the 7th Street Casino. However, two of the three judges urged the case to be restarted because of judicial mistakes

made over the years.

That led U.S. District Judge Richard D. Rogers to reopen the case in April. But last month, Rogers dismissed the state's case, calling it moot based on the federal government's sovereign immunity from lawsuits brought against it.

Kansas contends that the Oklahoma-based Wyandotte Nation tribe improperly bought the old Masonic temple and land in downtown Kansas City, Kan., for the 7th Street Casino. The state claims the purchase was made with federal funds

that were not allowed for such purposes.

"Federal law provides that only very specific lands may be used for Indian gaming," said Ashley Anstaett, spokeswoman for Kansas Attorney General Steve Six. "We are appealing because we believe this land does not qualify, and no court has yet decided that question. We would like an answer to that question."

The Wyandotte Nation would be disqualified for federally approved gambling on the site if a court were to determine that the state is correct.

The tribe spent \$20 million to

remodel the old temple and open it in January as a casino. It is estimated that the operation will gross between \$15 million and \$20 million a year.

If the matter is resolved in the tribe's favor, it is expected to seek a formal compact with Kansas under federal law to upgrade its gambling at the casino.

That would allow the operation to upgrade its estimated 500 bingo-based slot machines to table games and full-scale, Las-Vegas-style slots.

Montana woman named NIEA teacher of the year

HARDIN, Mont. (AP)—A fourth-grade teacher from Hardin has been named teacher of the year by the National Indian Education Association.

Montana's superintendent of schools, Linda McCulloch, says Roxanne Small Not Afraid will be recognized for her achievements and service to American Indian education on Oct. 25 at the association's 39th annual convention in Seattle.

Small Not Afraid teaches at Hardin Intermediate School and was nominated for the award by

district Superintendent Al Peterson.

The National Indian Education Association says its award-winners must demonstrate exceptional achievement or performance in providing quality instruction to American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian students.

Staff members at Hardin Intermediate say Small Not Afraid maintains a positive attitude while bringing out the maximum potential in her students.

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Budget

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Despite this good news, the current U.S. and global economic downturn could impact the tribes in the coming year.

For instance, the tribal enterprises, like other businesses,

thrive in a healthy economy, and suffer when the economy is weak.

Members with tribal budget questions are welcome to contact Michele Stacona at 553-3497, email

mstacona@wstribes.org; or Ray Potter at 553-3546, email

rpotter@wstribes.org. (See page 10 for the budget message of the secretary-treasurer, and the 2009 proposed tribal budget.)

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