

Tribe opposes 'radical change'

MEETINGS continued
from front page

Walala people had many village sites in the Gorge near present-day Cascade Locks and the Walala were included in the 1855 Willamette Valley Treaty, which also included the Clackamas Chinook.

Policywise, the Grand Ronde Tribe argues that allowing the Warm Springs Tribe to go off-reservation to build a casino closer to the Portland area is unfair to other Oregon Tribes that have invested significantly in casinos built on Tribal lands. The Cascade Locks site is about 35 miles away from the northwestern boundary of the Warm Springs Reservation, but more than 100 driving miles away from population center in Warm Springs.

"Allowing the first off-reservation casino in the Columbia River Gorge is a radical change from the historic state policy that treats all Tribes equally, limiting each Tribe to one casino on reservation lands," said Tribal lobbyist and member Justin Martin during the Feb. 10 General Council meeting regarding the Tribe's opposition to off-reservation gaming.

"With on-reservation alternatives available, it just doesn't make any sense."

The Grand Ronde Tribe has offered to help the Warm Springs

Tribe build a new casino on reservation land, making it more convenient to the burgeoning central Oregon population centers of Bend, Redmond and Madras. The Warm Springs declined the offer, opting to spend millions of dollars on the 10-year-old Gorge casino effort.

Tribal projections estimate that if the Warm Springs build a casino along Interstate 84 in the Gorge, it would single-handedly decrease Spirit Mountain Casino's dividend to the Tribe by 34.6 percent because it would be closer and more convenient to Portland-area residents than driving to Spirit Mountain Casino.

Grand Ronde Tribal estimates predict that the Cascade Locks casino proposal, if it is eventually approved by the Secretary of Interior, will not open for business until late 2013.

The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde is not the only entity opposed to the Warm Springs Gorge casino proposal and a potential change in state policy regarding off-reservation gaming.

The Friends of the Columbia Gorge, Oregon Restaurant Association and Oregon Family Council are among 15 groups that have come out in opposition to the proposal.

Following the five hearings on the draft environmental impact statement, it will return to the Department of Interior, which will write a final environmental impact

statement and then send it to the desk of Secretary Dirk Kempthorne for a record of decision.

Kempthorne opposed off-reservation casinos when he was governor of Idaho and has shown no signs that he will OK the Warm Springs proposal or others the Interior Department lists as pending.

In early January, the Department of Interior issued new guidelines for off-reservation casinos that give more consideration to the environmental compatibility of a project, as well as "reasonable, regular" commuting distances between reservation residents and a new casino's location.

Most Warm Springs Reservation residents live more than 100 miles away near the Kah-Nee-Ta Desert Resort and Casino in Warm Springs near Madras, a distance many critics think is not a "reasonable, regular" commute for Tribal members because even the quickest route would require Tribal employees spend at least two hours traveling one-way.

The Warm Springs also have announced they plan on building residences near the Gorge casino for Tribal employees. Critics say that it will be detrimental to reservation life to have adult parents away from home five days a week.

The intent of the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act was to foster strong reservation economies.

Long commutes that lure Tribal residents away from residing on their reservation do not accomplish the act's goal, Interior said when issuing the new guidelines.

Other critics have expressed concern about a proposed new Interstate 84 interchange that would lead travelers directly into the resort and casino property and have potentially detrimental effects on other local businesses.

The wild card in the entire process is the current presidential election. If a decision is not made before Jan. 20, 2009, it is possible that Kempthorne, a Bush appointee, will be out as Interior Secretary and both the Grand Ronde and Warm Springs Tribes will have to await a new appointee with unknown attitudes about off-reservation gaming.

People who cannot attend any of the five meetings can submit comments by using the project Web site, www.gorgecasinoeis.com/co/comment_form.html — or mail or hand-deliver comments to Stanley Speaks, Northwest Regional Director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, 911 N.E. 11th Ave., Portland, Ore. 97232, or fax 503-231-2275.

Comments must be received by May 15 to be considered during the preparation of the final environmental impact statement, which is expected to be completed late in the year. ■

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