

Green vs. Green: Warm Springs proposal

By Dean Rhodes and Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writers

The final three public hearings held by the Bureau of Indian Affairs about the Warm Springs Tribe's proposal to build a \$389 million, 603,000-square-foot riverfront destination and casino on 60 acres in Cascade Locks boiled down to debating green vs. green — environmental concerns against badly needed revenue for the Warm Springs Tribe and possible economic stimulus for the depressed town of Cascade Locks.

Or, as one person asked rhetorically during one of the meetings, "Will bucks triumph beauty?"

During the three hearings — held between March 12 and March 17 in Stevenson, Wash., Portland and Hood River — the concerns of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde about encroachment by another Tribe into Grand Ronde ancestral and historic homelands and abrogation of a long-standing state policy of one casino per Tribe on reservation land were on the back burner.

However, the Grand Ronde Tribe's opposition to the proposal remained at the forefront as some casino supporters criticized the Grand Ronde for not supporting the Warm Springs Tribe's efforts.

The March 13 hearing held in downtown Portland was indicative of the three hearings. The packed 350-seat hearing room was not large enough to accommodate the 100 additional people waiting outside; the 2.5-hour schedule burgeoned to four hours to accommodate those who wanted to speak for three minutes; and proponent speakers — mostly Warm Springs Tribal members and Cascade Locks residents — outnumbered opponents approximately 2-to-1.

About the same number of people attended the Stevenson and Hood River hearings, and those hearings also lasted four hours. (The first two hearings, held in Warm Springs and Cascade Locks, were covered in the March 15 edition of *Smoke Signals*.)

But by the time the hearings reached Hood River Middle School on March 17, the arguments had been all but exhausted and half of the attendees left at the first break 90 minutes into the hearing.

Money vs. environment

At the Portland hearing held in the DoubleTree Hotel Lloyd Center, testimony pro and con boiled down to environmental concerns vs. the desire of the Warm Springs Tribe and city of Cascade Locks to make money by siting the Bridge of the Gods casino on 60 acres that are within the city and zoned for light and heavy industrial development, and therefore exempt from the restrictive Gorge National Scenic Act.

To build the casino, the Warm Spring Tribe needs the U.S. Department of Interior to OK taking 25 acres into trust that are adjacent to 35 acres owned by the Port of Cascade Locks. Under the plan, the Warm Springs Tribe will lease the Port's land for ancillary casino facilities (parking, site drainage, utilities, etc.) and it will not be brought into trust.

"If this plan goes forward," said Stephen Klein, president and chairman of the board of EnviroEye, "we will lose another part of Oregon's pristine quality. Don't let the green dollar signs of this casino replace the green of our environment."

Georgia Shell, who wore a "No Gorge Casino" sticker, said she was concerned about how the casino will affect plant and animal life, particularly eagles and salmon, in the Gorge.

"I have not heard how the casino will benefit the Columbia River Gorge," Shell said.

Pat Wall, Friends of the Columbia Gorge board member, said the Gorge and Crater Lake are the state's two natural crown jewels. She also cited the long commute — more than 100 miles one-way — for Warm Springs Tribal members as a reason to reject the Cascade Locks alternative.

Wall also said she did not like the Hood River alternative, suggesting that the Warm Springs Tribe relocate its current casino, Kah-Nee-Ta, to a site on reservation land across from the Museum at Warm Springs on U.S. Highway 26 in central Oregon.

The Warm Springs have the state's largest reservation at 640,000 acres.

Beaverton resident Angie Moore, chairwoman of the Friends of the Columbia Gorge board of directors, cited the fact that the Warm Springs Tribe's proposed casino would be equivalent to placing 65 Portland city blocks in the middle of the environmentally sensitive Gorge. She also mentioned the "grueling commute" Warm Springs Tribal members would have to endure daily to work at the casino.

"I hope you see through the sham of this EIS (environmental impact statement)," Moore said.

Kevin Gorman, executive director of Friends of the Columbia Gorge, said 60 percent of Oregonians oppose building a casino in the Gorge. He submitted a box containing 4,000 cards opposing and 30 supporting the Tribe's effort.

"There is nothing, nothing that can make it environmentally friendly," Gorman said. "Casino construction will be harmful to eight species of salmon. And a red herring is the Hood River alternative. It is not legal or logistically practical. The on-reservation alternative is the best alternative."

Judith Warner criticized the "continuous assault" on the Columbia River. "What are we thinking in ruining such a scenic place?" she asked. "This will be a death blow to the beauty of the Gorge."

Good stewards of the land

In rebuttal, Native supporters pointed to the damage already done to the Columbia River and Gorge by western settlers, from the building of dams to pollution flowing downriver from eastern Oregon landfills and the Hanford radioactive waste disposal site in eastern Washington.

Many Warm Springs Tribal members testified that their Tribe has a long history of being good stewards of the land, pre-dating arrival of western settlers in Oregon.

Other Warm Springs Tribal members said they were "being held hostage" to an environmental double-standard and charged Friends of the Columbia Gorge with "environmental racism."

"You foreigners have done the greatest harm to the land," one Warm Springs Tribal member said.

But those comments prompted Grand Ronde Tribal Elder Valerie Alexander to say, "Just because so much damage has been done is not an excuse to commit more damage. ... I don't want my own Tribe to build there either."

In Stevenson, Tribal Council member Valorie Sheker spoke against the previous Cascade Locks audience that she said had "disrespected" Grand Ronde Tribal Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy.

"How dare you!" Sheker said, and then defended the Grand Ronde. "You say that this is only about Warm Springs. Other Tribes are affected, and how dare you say that Grand Ronde was built off-reservation! The casino is on reservation land given at Restoration."

Sheker also addressed the BIA's obligation to all Oregon Tribes.

"We should remember that the federal government has a trust responsibility to all Tribes," Sheker said. "When Warm Springs supported us for Restoration, they knew of

our people's connection to the river. Don't tell us we've never been there!"

Back in Portland, Grand Ronde Tribal member Ann Lewis also testified that part of the federal government's responsibility in reviewing the Warm Springs Tribe's casino proposal is to consider its effect on other Tribes. Grand Ronde estimates predict a Warm Springs casino in Cascade Locks will reduce Spirit Mountain Casino's dividend to the Tribe by more than 34 percent.

Lewis said the Warm Springs Tribe shouldn't receive the "golden egg" of having the closest, most convenient casino to the Portland metropolitan area at the expense of another Tribe.

Tribal Council member Kathleen Tom defended the Grand Ronde Tribe against accusations of greed, mentioning that the Grand Ronde offered to help the Warm Springs Tribe relocate its casino to a more advantageous location in central Oregon on reservation land to tap into the growing Bend area.

"That's not the attitude of a greedy Tribe," Tom said.

The Warm Springs Tribe declined the offer, instead choosing to spend millions of dollars on the Cascade Locks effort.

Tribal Council member Steve Bobb Sr. also defended the Tribe.

"We are well aware of the plight of the Warm Springs and the effort to make the Grand Ronde out to be the bad guy," he said. "We offered to help the Warm Springs people to the tune of millions of dollars. Grand Ronde are a giving and sharing people."

"But we're not in favor of changing a policy that every Tribe in Oregon has lived by."

'Smoke and mirrors'

In Stevenson, Grand Ronde Tribal Vice Chair Reyn Leno suggested some practical concerns that had not been addressed.

"I don't believe (the casino) is going to resolve all of your issues. It's not there," Leno said. "You don't have to believe me, just do the math. There are a lot of smoke and mirrors here."

"And for those communities that think a casino will help the other businesses, go to Willamina or Grand Ronde. In our community, it is the same Grand Ronde that we had 12 years ago (when Spirit Mountain Casino was built). People do not spend their money in the community. They come to the casino, they do their thing and they go home."

Leno also touched on the commute from Warm Springs, which can be treacherous during the winter on two-lane roads just east of Mount Hood.

"When the Warm Springs say they'll transport workers (the 100-plus miles) to the (proposed) Cascade Locks casino, trust me, after the first crash or death, Tribal members will be looking for someone to blame," Leno said.

"This (proposed casino) building is not something that you can just take

Still time to comment

Although the five public hearings on the Cascade Locks Resort and Casino Draft Environmental Impact Statement are over, Grand Ronde Tribal members can still submit comments in various ways. Deadline to comment is May 15.

Ways to comment include:

- ◆ Submit comments using the project Web site at www.gorgecasinoeis.com/co/comment_form.html
- ◆ Mail or hand deliver written comments to Stanley Speaks, Northwest Regional Director, Bureau of Indian Affairs, 911 N.E. 11th Ave., Portland, OR 97232, or send a fax to 503-231-2275.

After May 15, the Bureau of Indian Affairs will review the public comments and begin working on the final Environmental Impact Statement, which may be released later this year and have a 30-day comment period.

After that, the final EIS will be sent to the Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs for a record of decision.