

Grand Ronde will not support Siletz Salem Casino proposal

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde will not support the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians' proposal to build an 180,800-square-foot casino with 2,000 gaming devices and 45 table games just north of downtown Salem.

The Siletz Tribe filed their application for the project on April 30 with the Department of the Interior's Office of Indian Gaming.

"The Siletz proposal would have a devastating impact on Grand Ronde and Spirit Mountain Casino," said Tribal Communications Director Sara Thompson on Thursday, June 25. "We cannot support it. In the meantime, we're continuing to explore all of our options in case the gaming landscape in Oregon changes."

The proposed Siletz casino complex also would feature a 500-room hotel, three restaurants, food court, nightclub, sports bar and multi-purpose events center that would accommodate a 20,000-square-foot ballroom. It also would feature a 2,000-car parking garage and two surface parking lots.

The Siletz Tribe touts the economic benefits of the proposed casino in its application, estimating that it would provide approximately 1,473 full- and part-time jobs in the gaming facility, hotel, convention center, restaurants and related amenities with 80 percent to 90 percent of the jobs being filled by non-Tribal members. It would cost a projected \$410 million to build and support 2,373 construction jobs in Marion and Polk counties.

Smoke Signals obtained a redacted copy of the Siletz Tribe's application through the Freedom of Information Act. Mostly proprietary financial information was excised from the copy.

The proposed casino would be located on 20 acres that has been held in trust for the Siletz Tribe since 2000 at the Portland Road NE

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exit east of Interstate 5. The Siletz Tribe currently operates the Hee Hee Illahee RV Resort on a small portion of the trust parcel.

In its application, the 5,502-member Siletz Tribe says that despite the success of Chinook Winds Casino in Lincoln City over the past 25 years, 24 percent of Siletz households in the Siletz area still have incomes below the federal poverty level and that the Tribal unemployment rate remains high with the median household income of Tribal members living in the Siletz area 63 percent below that of other Oregon households.

"Chinook Winds Casino faces substantial competition from other Tribal casinos closer to the major urban areas in Oregon and from the Oregon Lottery," the application states. "The current casino supplements the Siletz Tribe's total budget, but does not come close to meeting the Tribe's unmet needs, and the income from Chinook Winds has plateaued in recent years."

The Siletz Tribe said it has identified almost \$266 million in unmet needs in Tribal programs, including education, social services, health care, substance abuse intervention and Elder services.

"Revenue from the proposed Salem Casino also will allow the Siletz Tribe to pursue investment opportunities in other business ventures and further diversify its economy, which would potentially lead to additional revenues for the Tribal government and more job opportunities for Siletz Tribal members," the application states.

To quell possible opposition, the Siletz Tribe said it will make payments to the city of Salem for infrastructure upgrades and has met with other Oregon Tribes to

discuss revenue sharing arrangements "that would allow these rural Tribes to share revenue."

Proposals for a north Salem casino from the Siletz Tribe date back to the early 1990s and faced opposition then. A 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruling in 1997 upheld a governor's ability to limit or deny gaming facilities in urban areas and then-Gov. John Kitzhaber opposed building casinos off-Reservation.

In 2017, the Siletz Tribe proposed building a casino at the site and splitting the proceeds with the state of Oregon and eight other federally recognized Tribes in Oregon. The Grand Ronde Tribe objected to that proposal as well.

Grand Ronde Tribal lobbyist Justin Martin also said at the time that a casino off Interstate 5 near Salem would be "devastating" to the Grand Ronde Tribe's Spirit Mountain Casino, which is currently the closest gaming enterprise to the Salem market.

The Salem market has become even more important to Spirit Mountain Casino since the Cowlitz Tribe opened its Ilani Casino approximately 17 miles north of the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan area in April 2017.

The Siletz Tribe would need approval from the Secretary of the Department of the Interior and Gov. Kate Brown before proceeding with its newest proposal. The state's current gaming policy of one casino per Tribe on Reservation land would have to be shelved for the Siletz to build.

In its application, the Siletz Tribe states that it is currently in discussions with the city of Salem and Brown's office regarding the proposal.

An e-mail to Brown's press sec-

retary, Elizabeth Merah, was not answered regarding the Siletz proposal.

The city of Salem responded to a Bureau of Indian Affairs' request for comments on Thursday, June 25, requesting that an environmental impact statement in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act be conducted to "understand the full impacts of a project of this scope and scale." The response did not state whether the city would be in favor or opposed to the development.

"The city of Salem's response focuses on the technical development aspects of the proposed gaming project," the city's response states. "Broader socio-economic and community impacts have not been considered in the city's response."

Approval from the federal government is not guaranteed. The Coquille Indian Tribe was recently turned down regarding its proposal to build a casino in Medford partially because of the distance – 165 miles – between Medford and the Coquille's headquarters near Coos Bay. Salem is approximately 87 driving miles from Siletz's headquarters on the Oregon coast.

Meanwhile, the Siletz and Grand Ronde Tribes are working together to develop the nearby 15.7-acre Chemawa Station property, which the two Tribes have owned since 2002. In its casino application, the Siletz Tribe asserts that "there is no evidence of any significant historical or cultural connections between the Grand Ronde Tribe and the site for the proposed Salem Casino."

The Grand Ronde and Siletz Tribal Councils were scheduled to hold a council-to-council meeting on Tuesday, June 23, but it was canceled and will be rescheduled. ■

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