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GRAND RAPIDS BUSINESS JOURNAL EXPRESS

BECAUSE BUSINESS CAN'T WAIT

FOCUS TOPICS



BUSINESS JOURNAL PHOTO/JOHNNY QUIRIN

Tribal Chairman D.K. Sprague, from left, James Nye and John Shagonaby are anxious to see a casino built in Wayland.

In Name Only

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DORR — The Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians Tribal Council last week voted to name its forthcoming casino The Gun Lake Casino. And that is the only new development in the four-year struggle of the small Indian nation in Allegan County, commonly known as the Gun Lake Tribe, to build a gaming facility.

Nearly a year has passed since the U.S. Department of Interior announced it would take the former Ampro manufacturing facility in Bradley into trust, clearing the way for its \$250 million transformation into a 147-acre casino.

Plans have long been drawn. It will be roughly half the size of the Soaring Eagle Casino Resort in Mount Pleasant, with 2,400 machines and 75 tables. It will directly employ 1,800 after construction is complete, not including the labor required for the 12- to 14-month project.

A year has passed since the tribe's highly successful career fair. Nearly 8,000 visitors participated over the course of two days, learning about the benefits and responsibilities of dealers, administrators, slot attendants, floor managers, bartenders and so forth. A similar fair for prospective vendors was also well attended.

"I keep having people come up to me and ask, 'When are you going to open? I need a job,'" said Tribal Chairman D.K. Sprague. "We're ready to start our economic development, but it's out of our control."

The federal land-in-trust decision was challenged in a lawsuit last summer by West Michigan anti-gambling group MichGo, short for Michigan Gambling Opposition, with financial support from 23 is Enough, an organization formed by Grand Rapids opponents to gaming expansion.

The tribe has seen encouraging news since then. A congressional investigation revealed that embattled Republican lobbyist Jack Abramoff may have been pulling the strings behind early delays on behalf of the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe, owners of the Soaring Eagle. Also, a federal appeals court decision identical to the MichGo complaint could help remove the Gun Lake Tribe's current obstacle.

In January, Dowagiac's Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians and the Secretary of the Interior defeated a five-year effort by Taxpayers of Michigan Against Casinos, a Southwest Michigan organization similar in design to MichGo and 23 is Enough, with the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit Court describing the group's argument that the government flaunted environmental law and had no authority to approve the gaming project as "specious" and having "no merit."

The primary arguments in MichGo's complaint are identical to that of TOMAC, setting a precedent for when the case finally does reach court.

"We feel very confident that the Pokagon decision will help expedite the process," said John Shagonaby, the CEO of MBPI Inc., the tribe's economic development office. "But right now we're still waiting, and that's the hard part ... we're ready to go."

In the meantime, the tribe has only to name the various parts of the casino — the upscale restaurant, buffet, and the circle bar at the center of the building — and choose the fast-food vendors that will occupy the food court.

While the wait has stalled the tribe's economic development plans, Shagonaby has concerns that the delay is also costing the region opportunity by the day.

The vast majority of land around the casino site is commercially undeveloped. There is virtually no development on 129th Avenue, the crossroad from U.S. 131.

"The opportunity is out there for people," Shagonaby said. "But the

greater opportunity is within the convention business."

In the convention industry, he said, "gaming is huge." He cited the runaway popularity of Las Vegas as a convention destination.

"Our position is, we should be working on this now," he said. "We should be getting rid of the barriers and obstacles and try to market this region as a team."

He compared the controversy, which has largely become Grand Rapids vs. its southern neighbors, to that of other tribal developments across the country.

"Once it opens and communities see all these people coming in, they always want to be a part of it," he said. "Our competition isn't the Van Andel Arena or DeltaPlex or Wings Stadium, it's other casinos."

The tribe has been actively working with the Kalamazoo Convention and Visitors Bureau on such a plan, along with dozens of chambers of commerce and trade associations south of Grand Rapids. The Kent County Lodging Association has led the Grand Rapids efforts thus far.

"We're already at a disadvantage," Shagonaby said. "We're clearly the last ones in the market. We're going to have to build something that is nice, well-run and well-managed in order to get customers."

Soaring Eagle, for instance, has been in the market for 15 years. The Little River Casino Resort in Manistee (a member of the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce, which is opposed to the Gun Lake project) has been in business for nearly as long. Shortly, the Pokagon tribe will open its casino near the Indiana border, the state's 24th.

"This makes it more important for the people in this area," Shagonaby said. "They have a huge opportunity to draw people from across Michigan and from other states."

The tribe has partnered with Nevada-based Station Casinos to manage the casino.

Aside from the casino, the tribe does have one project running smoothly. The Luella Collins Community Center is currently under construction on 126th Street in Wayland Township. Financed in part by expected casino revenue, the center will serve as a gathering place for the tribe.

"Right now, if we want to have an event, we have to rent out a hotel room or hall," Shagonaby said.

The facility will include a half-court gymnasium, library, lounge, main hall, deck and classrooms. **BJX**

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