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Michael Powers, BayPointe Inn and Restaurant co-owner and general manager, has been fielding inquiries regarding when the proposed Gun Lake Casino will open.

## Wayland Waits For Windfall

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Published: October 8, 2007

*(Editor's note: This is the first installment of a series of stories examining the potential economic and public impact in the vicinity of the planned Gun Lake Casino.)*

WAYLAND TOWNSHIP — Seven years in the making, the Gun Lake Casino is now a court decision and 20 state senators away from becoming the first Class III gaming facility in West Michigan. Oral arguments for what should be the final round of appeals for a federal court case blocking the potentially \$250 million project are scheduled for Oct. 19 in Washington, D.C., with a decision expected before the Thanksgiving holiday.



Barring a dramatic turn of events, the U.S. Department of Interior should soon take the former Ampro manufacturing facility in Bradley into trust on behalf of the Match-E-Be-

Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians, commonly known as the Gun Lake Tribe, clearing the way for a first quarter 2008 groundbreaking.

“One of the top calls I get at the chamber office is ‘When is the casino coming?’” said Jackie Straub, executive director of the Wayland Area Chamber of Commerce. “They want to go to it, they want to work at it, or they want to open up a business near it. How can this not be positive?”

According to Straub, the casino has been a leading topic of conversation among potential investors in Wayland Township for the better part of a decade. To varying degrees, the interest has inspired a number of launches along the township’s primary commercial strip, the stretch of Superior Street between U.S. 131 and downtown Wayland. Among these are the new Uccello’s Wayland at 700 W. Superior, an offshoot of the popular Grand Rapids-based restaurant and sports bar.

“That was definitely one of the things we were looking at,” explained Uccello’s general manager Silvana Vitale. “We knew that this would be an area with strong development potential. There would be more opportunity for the people who live here, more traffic and more people visiting Wayland.”

The increased employment alone will dramatically alter Allegan County. The casino will directly employ an estimated 1,800 people after construction is complete, equal to over half the population of Wayland Township.

“People think in terms of the casino as a destination venue, and that may or may not happen, but when you put that many new employees in one place, it can’t help but benefit an area,” said Straub.

“A lot of businesses aren’t viewing this in terms of increased tourism,” added Ann Kilmartin, chamber executive director through the first five years of the casino development and a current member of the Wayland Planning Commission and Allegan County Tourism Council. “The growth that is going to happen with employees will be the backbone for further development.”

With roughly 100,000 square feet of gaming, including 2,400 machines and 75 tables, the proposed casino is roughly half the size of the Soaring Eagle Casino Resort in Mount Pleasant. At 147 acres, it is a quarter of the size of the Four Winds Casino Resort that opened this summer in New Buffalo. Nevertheless, it is the largest economic development project in Wayland’s history, and arguably the largest ever to hit Allegan County.

“It’s huge,” said Judy Bott, proprietor of O’Neil’s Restaurant & Pub across the county line in Middleville. “When people hear that you’re involved, it’s all they want to talk about.”

Bott, a Byron Center resident, formed the Friends of the Gun Lake Indians in 2001 with

Dorr resident Marcia Halloran, then the proprietor of a bridal boutique in Dorr. Today 10,000 members strong, the volunteer group has served as a counterbalance to Michigan Gambling Opposition, the Moline-based organization that has challenged the casino development in federal court, and 23 is Enough, a now-inactive alliance of Grand Rapids business leaders and politicians.

The original intent of the organization was to defend the tribe against the aggressive tactics used by MichGo when the casino plan was first introduced in 2000, specifically the disruptive displays and sometimes off-color protests at tribe informational sessions. In recent years, it has served largely to promote the economic development potential of the casino through job fairs, rallies and grassroots lobbying.

Speaking for her establishment and FOGLI as a whole, Bott refutes opposition claims that the casino will have a negative impact on entertainment and hospitality venues in Allegan County.

“I think it will be good for everybody out there,” said Bott. “With the projected numbers they have, if you can get just half a percent of that traffic it would be great. The business owners don’t feel intimidated. On the contrary, they’re supportive.”

In a general consensus, the tribe, the Allegan County Sheriff’s Department and the Department of Interior are estimating that the casino will increase traffic along the U.S. 131 corridor by 18,000 to 20,000 visitors a day. Bott’s restaurant is on the M-179 highway, the most direct route into Bradley from Barry County.

“Anything that can bring more people into the market is a great thing,” said Stephanie Peterson, marketing director for the Knoll-Gas Motorsports Park in Martin. “We see a great opportunity here. We joke that the husbands can come to the race while the wives can go to the casino.”

Located one exit north of Bradley, the city of Wayland is the nearest commercial corridor to the casino site. There is virtually no commercial development in Bradley, an unincorporated community with two notable golf courses and easy access to Gun Lake. The village of Martin, a two-stoplight town directly to the south, is roughly twice the distance.

There are a handful of seasonal businesses on Gun Lake and at least one successful all-seasons resort property, the three-year-old BayPointe Inn and Restaurant.

“There is no question that the businesses in the area will benefit from the casino and it’s eventual arrival,” said Michael Powers, BayPointe co-owner and general manager. “We already have people inquiring about the casino. Guests come here for the recreational and leisure end of things, but quite often they are interested in doing something a little more stimulating or invigorating.”

Skiing, golfing, boating and other outdoor activities are readily available on site and at

adjacent facilities, but some guests, particularly corporate groups, desire a higher energy entertainment package. Currently, Powers can only direct these guests to facilities in Kalamazoo or Grand Rapids, such as the Van Andel Arena, but few are willing to make the trip.

The BayPointe also has the added benefit of being one of only three hotels within 15 minutes of the casino site. It is the only luxury hotel.

“It will definitely bring another dimension to the experience here,” Powers said. “We feel we’ll be able to bring in bus tours to our property that can enjoy our amenities during the day and then go gamble at night. It’s going to be immense for our tourist business.”

The other nearby accommodations are the Comfort Inn in Plainwell and the Wayland Hotel and Bar in Wayland.

A recent study conducted by Central Michigan University on the economic impact of the first four tribal casinos found that hotels and other accommodations saw by far the greatest gains from casinos. The number of lodging establishments in host counties increased by 160 percent in the 10 years after a casino opened, compared to 11 percent in the state as a whole. Total payroll for the lodging sector increased 119 percent in host counties, compared to 39 percent statewide.

“If I had a casino opening in my community, I’d probably want to invest in this industry,” said CMU Professor James Hill, the study’s lead author. He noted less significant impacts in the rest of the hospitality sector, with a slight increase in restaurants and bars and mixed results for entertainment attractions.

The study discovered negative impacts as well: Non-host counties within 50 miles of a casino lost 25 percent of their lodging establishments over the course of the study. Hill was careful to point out that the study excluded metropolitan communities such as Kent, Oakland or Ottawa counties, and that it makes no correlation between the decreases in bordering counties and the presence of a casino.

Such a conclusion would lend weight to the predictions of economist George Erickcek, senior regional analyst for the Upjohn Institute in Kalamazoo (see related story). Erickcek reasons that because of the increased number of casinos in the larger West Michigan market, the Gun Lake Casino will not succeed in bringing new dollars into the community. Instead, it will displace spending that would have occurred elsewhere in the region, most likely Grand Rapids.

Likewise, not all Allegan County businesses are looking forward to the casino. The county’s largest employer, generic pharmaceutical manufacturer Perrigo Inc., has actively campaigned against it. The company deferred questions to board member and former chairman and CEO Michael Jandernoa, one of the more vocal members of 23 is Enough.

“The economic impact that is favorable within a couple of miles is very unfavorable

within a 50-mile radius, particularly to manufacturing jobs that require quality,” said Jandernoa. “There is a negative impact from a number of people that have difficulty controlling their need and interest in gambling.”

Anecdotally, Jandernoa said that proximity to gaming facilities creates a negative impact on absenteeism, tardiness and other personnel issues related to bankruptcy and divorce. There is no readily available data to support this.

“A lot of companies don’t like to talk about it, but you definitely see it in the Detroit area,” he said. Detroit has three casinos. “Our senior executives (at Perrigo) are very concerned. It’s a global world and not every country has such an intense concentration of casinos. None of the provinces in India or China do, and that makes the competitive landscape even worse.”

Jandernoa suggested that the introduction of casino gambling to the state was a contributing factor to the collapse of the automotive industry.

“I’m not saying it’s the only reason, but it’s an additional factor,” he said. “You don’t have to be an economic specialist to see some of these correlations.” **BJX**

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