

CasiNOW! Tribe breaks ground Sept. 17

by Charlotte Weick

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Charlotte Weick Gun Lake Tribe officials recently broke the news about the groundbreaking. From left are MBPI, Inc. (tribal economic development corporation) Chief Executive Officer John Shagonaby, Tribal Spokesperson James Nye, Tribal Chairman D.K. Sprague, Tribal Vice-Chairman Ed Pigeon and Station Casinos Vice President of Native American Gaming Richard St. James.

For nearly a decade, the Gun lake Casino has remained one of the hottest topics in Allegan County. Locals have debated the issue, placed signs on their lawns that read, "CasiNO" or "CasiNOW," exchanged heated words at public meetings and argued whether the casino would be a boon or bust for the community.

The Penasee Globe was the first to hear the news that the Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians (Gun Lake Tribe) will break ground Sept. 17 for the Gun Lake Casino, bringing Las Vegas style Class III gaming to Allegan County.

The casino will be managed by the tribe's management partner, MPM Enterprises, LLC, owned by an affiliate of Station Casinos, Inc. and private investors from Michigan.

Phased approach for a new casino

Originally, the Gun Lake Tribe planned to build a \$200 million, 193,000-square-foot casino, with 2,500 slot machines and 75 gaming tables, which would have taken around 16 to 18 months to complete. Tribal Council members approved Phase I development for a casino that will be around half the size of the original plan. The Phase I development plan makes it possible for the tribe to assume a smaller amount of debt, putting the tribe in a good financial position, said Tribal Spokesman James Nye. Later casino expansion will be based on customer demand, Nye said.

When Michigan's economy is on the rebound, the tribe can expand the casino to the east of the existing casino.

"Why wait until the economy rebounds," said John Shagonaby, chief executive officer of the tribe's economic development corporation, MBPI, Inc. "It was a smart business decision."

"The reduced construction timeline will bring badly needed jobs, economic activity and revenue sharing dollars to the local community much sooner," Nye said.

"Even though we are starting with a smaller facility than we originally envisioned, it will still be a high quality facility with excellent customer service in a warm and friendly environment," Sprague said.

Nye said that the tribe's decision to take a phased approach to development was not due to a recent Chapter 11 bankruptcy filing by Station Casinos. He said that the more prudent approach to the development was, "Based on the recession."

"The filing was at a parent company level and has no bearing on Station Casinos development programs," said Station Casinos Vice President of Native American Gaming Richard St. James.

The Gun Lake Casino will be located on 147 acres of tribal reservation land on 129th Avenue, near U.S. 131, east of Gun Lake. Tribal officials estimate that it will take around 10 to 12 months to complete the casino construction project.

The \$157 million, 83,000 square foot facility will contain 1,200 slot machines and 36 gaming tables, offering traditional Class III games like roulette, craps and blackjack.

The casino will have an entertainment lounge and casino bar, a 300-seat restaurant and a food court with three outlets. The restaurant and casino will operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week and there will be parking for 2,100 vehicles.

Three buildings at the site were part of the former Ampro Products company. The two buildings to the west will be demolished and recycled and the casino will be built from the ground up. The third building near 129th Avenue will remain to be renovated for administrative use.

The project manager is David Wright of the Dorr-based Wright Consulting. Skanska USA will serve as the general contractor for the project. One of the world's leading project development and construction groups, Skanska has a West Michigan office in Kalamazoo and has worked on numerous multi-million dollar projects, including construction of new Lowe's stores and construction management for a 2000 and 2005 bond program for the Paw Paw School District.

The Phase I development will include improvements to 129th Avenue, including the addition of a turn lane. The start date of the road project will be determined at a later date.

Water for the casino will come from on-site wells, with wastewater treatment provided by an enclosed MBR (membrane bioreactor) facility located north of the casino and south of Buskirk Creek. MBR facilities use a combination of biological treatment processes with an integrated, immersed membrane system for the treatment of wastewater.

Entertainment, employment and economic development

The tribe and casino supporters welcome the entertainment, employment, economic development and revenue sharing that the casino will provide. The Phase I casino project will create around 750 construction jobs. The casino will create around 600 direct jobs with an average annual compensation package of around \$40,000 in wages and benefits, as well as an estimated 1,000 additional indirect jobs.

The local community can expect healthy, organic growth with the coming of the casino, with new businesses and new housing, St. James said.

According to tribal officials, the casino will spur around \$30 million annual vendor spending on goods and services and bring around 60,000 new guests to the area annually. Those guests will stay at local hotels, generating around \$4.4 million additional revenues for area hotels.

The Gun Lake Tribe has a negotiated compact with the State of Michigan, approved by the House and Senate and signed by Governor Jennifer Granholm. According to the contract's revenue sharing agreement, the casino will provide around \$9.1 million annually to a state revenue sharing fund and around \$2.3 million annually to a local revenue sharing board.

Casino Web site in the works

The Gun Lake Tribe is working on the development of a Gun Lake Casino Web site that will include information about opportunities for vendors and prospective employees. Information is also available on a casino job hot line at (866) 398-7111.

The groundbreaking will be held at 10 a.m. Saturday, Sept. 17. Because of space constraints, attendance at the ceremony is by invitation only. For casino updates, visit the Gun Lake Tribe Web site at www.mbpi.org.