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## Okla. Apache tribe seeks casino nod

Luna County trust land is to be tribe's future home

By Todd G. Dickson

While the Jemez Pueblo's attempt to open a casino in southern New Mexico has received a lot of local attention and debate, an Oklahoma-based tribe also is trying to get a casino approved on trust land it owns in Luna County.

Located in Akela Flats about halfway between Las Cruces and Deming on the north side of Interstate 10, the Fort Sill Apache tribe has a store and a casinoready 6,000-square-foot building, which sits on 30 acres recently established as reservationtrust land for the 700-member tribe.

The tribe had at one point tried to hold bingo games there, but former Gov. Bill Richardson stopped the tribe.

With new administrations in Santa Fe and Washington, D.C., Fort Sill Apache Chairman Jeff Haozous said the tribe has been able to make progress toward its goal of establishing a casino at Akela, with the intent of providing jobs for younger tribe members who would like to return to their original homeland.

The tribe is made up of the descendants of the Chiricahua and Warm Springs Apaches who fought against western settlers in the area around Deming and Silver City. U.S. troops eventually captured the tribe – which included Geronimo – and they were imprisoned at Fort Pickens and Fort Marion, Fla., until 1914. The members of the Fort Sill Apache tribe were imprisoned at Fort Sill, Okla., and eventually received allotments of land in Oklahoma.

In 1999, the tribe was able to buy the land at Akela Flats, Haozous said.

"The tribe always had the desire to return, but didn't have the means to," he said.

Last fall, after getting the Interior Department to officially declare the Akela Flats property as tribal trustland, the tribe began groundwork anew to develop the Apache Homelands Casino. The designation is part of a settlement of a legal dispute between the Fort Sill Apaches and a Comanche tribe, according to Haozous.

The tribe hired Luntz Global to conduct a local and statewide poll on the casino project last fall. An online survey and live phone poll of 500 New Mexicans found strong support for the project. Statewide, 58 percent agreed that tribal gaming creates jobs and that 63 percent saw casinos as a good way to

encourage economic growth. Almost 60 percent of those surveyed in Doña Ana and Luna counties gave their support to the Fort Sill proposal.

“New Mexicans are telling their leaders they want jobs, and that they believe Fort Still Apache tribe has a plan to create them,” said pollster Frank Luntz.

Besides the poll, the tribe also has been talking to members of Gov. Susana Martinez’s administration, who were open to finding a solution to the bingo dispute. Haozous said bingo operations are still “on the back burner” in order to open up dialogue with the Martinez administration.

There are several routes the tribe may take to getting a casino established, but they would require a good working relationship with the administration, according to Haozous. He said approval of the proposal could come in a similar methodology as the Jemez project that would require approval from both the Interior Department and the governor of New Mexico. Also, full table casino gaming would require the tribe to negotiate a compact with the state, he said. Unlike the Jemez project, an environmental impact study may not be necessary as the tribe already owns the land, he said.

“The other difference is that we’re not at square one,” Haozous said during a visit to Las Cruces Tuesday, Jan 14.

If it were to get approved, Haozous said a casino could be opened at Akela Flats as quickly as 45 days. When fully operational, the casino would have between 80 and 100 employees, he said. Many in Luna County support the project out of the need for more jobs and economic activity, he said.

The tribe held a town hall meeting in Deming late last year, which Haozous said was well attended by residents who were “99 percent” approving of the casino.

Haozous said his tribe opposes the Jemez project because it’s not their original homeland. He said it would be “painful” for the Jemez project to get approval for an off-reservation casino that is land that used to be on the border of the historical Chiricahua and Mescalero Apache tribal territories.

Mescalero Apache Tribe President Mark Chino has questioned the Fort Sill motivations in its casino plans, telling a state legislative committee that the members chose to stay in Oklahoma when given the opportunity to move to Mescalero in 1913.

Chino also said the Mescalero Apache tribe is opposed to a tribal casino at Akela Flats because it would take away customers from its Inn of the Mountain Gods resort casino.

“Mescalero’s primary market is the Las Cruces/El Paso area,” Chino told the committee. “Allowing recognition towards gaming would hurt Mescalero and the huge investment that Mescalero has made in its gaming operations.”

The Mescalero tribe also opposes the Jemez proposal.

“Our people have never given up on our dream of returning to the land we once occupied before forced evictions, first to Florida, then to Alabama and finally to Oklahoma,” Haozous said in response to Chino’s statements to the committee.



This is the Apache Homelands Casino building in Akela Flats, which was built in anticipation of the tribe someday getting approval for American Indian gaming activities.  
Fort Sill Apache tribe photo