



November 30, 2011 – Albuquerque Journal - Tribe Moves Forward on Gaming Plans

By [Rene Romo / Journal South Reporter](#)

LAS CRUCES – The Oklahoma-based Fort Sill Apache tribe is moving forward with efforts to develop a newly-designated reservation for gaming and other activities in southern New Mexico by scheduling a community meeting in Deming next month.

Tribal officials have not yet determined what path to take to seek federal approval for gaming at the Akela Flats site, which is located about halfway between Las Cruces and Deming on the north side of Interstate 10, but Fort Sill Apache Chairman Jeff Haozous (formerly Houser) said gaming at the site remains a key goal.

“Our first priority is to create the economic engine that would drive our return” to New Mexico, Haozous said.

Haozous said the Dec. 7 community meeting will give the tribe a chance to tell residents and community leaders about the tribe’s historical roots in the area and its plans, which include gaming and a cultural center.

The meeting will be at the Mimbres Valley Special Event Center at 4 p.m.

The tribe’s 685 members, nearly half of whom live in various parts of Oklahoma, are descendants of the Chiricahua and Warm Springs Apaches who occupied southwest New Mexico, southern Arizona and northern Mexico, until war chief Geronimo surrendered to the United States in 1896.

After Geronimo’s surrender, the Army shipped the Apaches as prisoners of war to Florida and Alabama before finally relocating them to Oklahoma. The Apaches were treated as prisoners of war for 27 years until their release in 1913, when some joined the Mescalero Apache reservation in the Sacramento Mountains while the rest remained in Oklahoma, without a reservation.

The tribe bought the 30-acre site known as Akela Flats in October 1998 and the Bureau of Indian Affairs took the land into trust on behalf of the tribe in 2001. The tribe opened a building to host high-stakes bingo games in 2008, but then-Gov. Bill Richardson deployed State Police to block the gaming and the chairman of the National Indian Gaming Commission issued a “notice of violation” claiming the bingo hall violated the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act.

The Fort Sill Apaches still have a hearing on that alleged violation pending before the National Indian Gaming Commission and the tribe has, in filings last year, continued to argue that the Akela Flats site qualifies for gaming under exceptions to federal law. The state Gaming Control Board in July filed a brief with the NIGC arguing the site does not qualify for gaming.

If the NIGC upholds the violation notice, tribal attorney Phillip Thompson said the tribe will appeal to federal court.

But, Thompson said, the tribe could take an alternate route for permission for gaming at the new reservation through a two-part process that requires the approval of the Interior secretary and Gov. Susana Martinez.

Haozous said that despite its stated opposition to gaming at the Akela Flats site, the Martinez administration has been more open to dialogue than Richardson's.

— This article appeared on page C1 of the Albuquerque Journal