

# BELOIT HO-CHUNK CASINO PROPOSAL GETS A BOOST

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - Interests from the federal, state and local level to bring a Ho-Chunk Nation casino to Beloit are hailing progress on the plan following a meeting last week with the Department of Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

The most recent meeting follows efforts last winter by officials to confirm the project would not be impeded by President Donald Trump taking office. The plan is currently pending with BIA, with the project's environmental impact study complete on the 38-acre site.

Officials said Monday the project is set to be decided by the BIA within two years, and if approved would head to Gov. Scott Walker for final approval or denial.

Parties involved in the process believe Beloit's plan could get favorable BIA review due to strong support in the city and public need due to Beloit's high unemployment and poverty rates. The casino plan could create 2,000 jobs, according to previous estimates.

"The decision makers at the BIA have told us the application will be moving forward in the process toward a final decision," said City Council President Kevin Leavy. "We don't know what a final decision will be, but at least we now know that review of the application will continue and we feel we made significant progress."

The next step, which still may be a while off, would be for BIA to issue a notice of availability in the federal register, prompting a public hearing on the project in Beloit.

The Ho-Chunk Nation, city and Rock County also have an agreement in place to share a percentage of revenue from the facility which will be used for building needed infrastructure projects in the area, officials say.

Ho-Chunk has agreed to pay two percent of the net win proceeds generated by the casino, and 30 percent of the two percent revenue would be allocated for the county. Payments of net win proceeds would be in lieu of property taxes at the proposed development, much of which would be on designated tribal land not subject to the tax.

The project includes a hotel and conference center, with officials hoping the project could spur other developments in the area.

"This facility will help the Nation provide desperately needed services for our tribal members," said Ho-Chunk Nation District IV Legislator Shelby Visintin. "Area tribal members will also be employed at the new facility and the revenues will allow us to expand educational opportunities, housing, health care services and nutritional programs for our members."

Beloit City Manager Lori Curtis Luther said she was "thrilled to see the project moving forward" adding, "We need to see these jobs and economic growth in Beloit as soon as possible."

Nation officials previously said they believe the project will move forward due to a 1990s compact between Ho-Chunk and the state specifying the tribe could open one additional Class Three gaming facility. Some of the most recent action on the plan included a 2015 extension of an intergovernmental agreement on the site near Colley and Willowbrook roads adjacent to Interstate 39/90.

The casino proposal has a long history in Beloit. The original proposal - submitted by the Bad River and St. Croix Chippewa bands - dates back into the 1990s. The Bad River and St. Croix plan lingered and never came to fruition, eventually being superseded by the Ho-Chunk designs for the property.

During the administration of Democrat Gov. Jim Doyle, it appeared the message from Madison was negative toward approving any casino plan that might be brought forward.

Gov. Scott Walker has handled one casino proposal, killing a plan to locate a facility in the Kenosha area. Because of its compact with the state calling for one additional site, the Ho-Chunk Nation has expressed optimism Walker would treat its Beloit plan differently than his decision in Kenosha. The governor has not said directly how he would decide a Beloit plan if it comes to his desk.