

Little movement seen on Ho-Chunk casino

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More than two years after the first public comments on the proposed Ho-Chunk Nation casino project in Beloit there is still very little movement from the federal government.

Ho-Chunk District I Rep. Susan Waukon said the draft for the Environmental Impact Statement has been at the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA) central office in Washington, D.C. since the fall of 2013.

The central office has to give its approval of the EIS before the draft can be published, Waukon said.

Ho-Chunk representatives visited Washington, D.C. in the summer, and officials said the draft had made it through the Office of Indian Gaming, but was waiting on approval from the Office of the Solicitor in the U.S. Department of the Interior.

"We are definitely hoping we see some movement next year," Waukon said, adding the Nation is keeping in touch with officials in Washington, D.C. "That is our plan to continue visiting and get it moving through the process."

Waukon said she didn't believe there was any intention to deny the EIS, and added the full casino application is still in the regional office in Minnesota.

"We're just waiting for the draft EIS to be signed off on to open the 45-day public comment period," she said.

Once the draft is published the public will have the chance to weigh-in on the document, which will then be taken into consideration before the final EIS is published.

The public last had a chance to comment on the casino project over two years ago in December 2012 when the BIA held a public hearing at Aldrich Middle School in Beloit. Only one resident spoke out against the project, however, there was an opportunity to submit written comments that will be published in the draft EIS.

"We were hoping to be much further along than we are now," Waukon said. "We did not anticipate waiting this long."

City Manager Larry Arft said the city was expecting some update by the end of this year. Arft said the city met with Ho-Chunk representatives a few months ago, and have been keeping up to date with a few conference calls this year.

He added the city will continue to work with the Ho-Chunk next year to assist with helping the project move forward. In February 2013 the city sold an additional 41 acres to the Ho-Chunk Nation for the casino project for \$1.8 million. The land is directly adjacent to the 32 acres of land where the casino will be built.

The additional land purchased by the Nation will be used for parking lots at other support facilities. The casino and planned hotel will be built on the 32 acres of land that the Nation.

Waukon said the plans for the casino have not changed. Back when the city sold the extra land to the Nation, William Martin Lowe, business development manager for the Ho-Chunk, said the project would be built in three phases.

The first phase included building the casino, located near Interstate 90/39, to start generating revenue for the other phases. The second phase would construct a hotel, conference center and other venues, and the third phase would build additional parking and retail stores on the 41 acres of additional land. The first two phases have an estimated cost of about \$200 million, and the third phase would likely start a couple years after the casino and hotel are constructed. The casino is planned to have over 2,000 slot machines and 50 gaming tables.