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## Ho-Chunk Beloit casino plan receives federal approval

By AUSTIN MONTGOMERY Staff Writer  
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This bird's-eye view of the proposed Ho-Chunk Nation casino resort development in Beloit shows the main campus of the project that federal approval on the project on Thursday, marking a key point in the development process.

Rendering provided

BELOIT — The Ho-Chunk Nation's casino and resort plan in Beloit took a major step forward Thursday, receiving federal approval and moving the project one step closer to a potential groundbreaking.

The project received approval from the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and is expected to be published in the Federal Register at a later date, according to Ho-Chunk Nation Public Information Officer Ryan Greendeer.



The plan will now shift to Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers, who is set to make a two-part determination on the project. The two-part process is required on gaming fee-to-trust acquisitions. The proposal would allow the transfer of 33 acres of land into trust status as part of a larger 73.5-acre plot owned by Ho-Chunk near Willowbrook and Colley roads in Beloit. The site is adjacent to Interstate 39/90 and on the west side of the highway, almost directly across from the Beloit Travel Wisconsin Welcome Center.

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If Evers approves the plan, Greendeer clarified on Thursday that the project would "be done in phases."

The decision by Evers cannot come in the form of a line-item veto aimed at separate parts of the project, he added.

"It's either thumbs up or thumbs down," Greendeer said.

In February of 2018 Evers, then state superintendent of schools seeking the governorship in a race against incumbent Republican Gov. Scott Walker, said in an interview with the *Beloit Daily News* that he would sign the proposal. Later, Evers walked back outright support of the plan after winning election to governor in November of 2018. Evers said he would carefully review the proposal "to ensure fair consideration" for all parties.

A spokesperson for Evers could not immediately be reached for comment on Thursday.

In February of 2019, a draft white paper prepared by Walker's Division of Gaming administration confirmed the Ho-Chunk Nation is entitled to one more casino through the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act passed by Congress in 1988, according to the document obtained by the *Beloit Daily News*.



The project options identified during the process include the full plan (casino/hotel/water park/conference center/adjacent retail component); a reduced casino and commercial development; only a retail development; and finally a no action/no development option.

Ho-Chunk, Beloit and Rock County officials are all-in on the full project option. The project, according to the tribe, is projected to create 1,500 jobs to Beloit.

“We’ve been operating under the assumption that we’re doing the full project...So we start with the infrastructure and work our way to the casino and restaurants; the hotel and conference center, water park and retail. I think the ultimate decision on each will come as they’re approached at that phase,” Greendeer said.

Greendeer said the tribe is currently working through design plans on the full-scale project.

The effort is decades in the making and follows steady movement since 2018.

In May of 2019, BIA published a notice of availability of a final environmental impact statement for the project and responded to public comments about the proposal made last year. That announcement followed a draft environmental impact statement from Nov. 9, 2018 that prompted a public hearing on the development on Dec. 11, 2018.

A proposal for a Hard Rock International casino in Rockford at the former site of the Clock Tower resort was approved in October of 2019. The proposal is currently under review by the Illinois Gaming Board.

In reacting to the federal news Thursday evening, officials were mindful of the challenges posed on all fronts by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Beloit City Manager Lori Curtis Luther said the city is focused on its virus response, but welcomes the federal approval.

“While the federal approval of Ho-Chunk Nation’s application to place land in trust and allow Las Vegas-style gambling at an entertainment destination in Beloit is news we have waited many years to receive, we must remain focused on the current state of emergency,” Luther said. “Unequivocally, our highest priority is doing everything we possibly can to keep our staff and the public safe. Once this crisis is over, we look forward to celebrating this amazing announcement that will bring much needed future revenue and jobs to Beloit.”

Ho-Chunk Nation Vice President Karena Thundercloud echoed the sentiment, saying the tribe is focused on protecting tribal members.



“The Ho-Chunk Nation’s focus remains on keeping people safe. We’re prioritizing critical programs and services the same as any other government, but we’re a resilient people,” Thundercloud said. “This’ll help the community tremendously.”

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Austin Montgomery

