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Beloit casino project receives approval from Evers

By AUSTIN MONTGOMERY Staff Writer

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The Ho-Chunk Nation's Beloit casino and resort project took a major step forward on Wednesday as Gov. Tony Evers ruled in favor of the project's proposed site being declared trust land for the tribe.

Submitted illustration

MADISON — The Ho-Chunk Nation's Beloit casino and resort project took a major step forward Wednesday as Gov. Tony Evers concurred with a federal decision to move land designated for the project into trust status, paving the way for one of the largest entertainment complexes in Wisconsin.

With Evers' concurrence, the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs will prepare the determination and begin the final administrative process for accepting the land into trust status for the Ho-Chunk Nation.

In a statement, the Ho-Chunk Nation called Evers' approval "an economic win for the Nation, the Beloit area and State of Wisconsin."

"We've been focusing so much time and effort on our COVID-19 response that it's almost surreal to have this great news of the Governor's concurrence today," said Ho-Chunk Nation Vice President Karena Thundercloud. "We want to thank the City of Beloit, Rock County, and our respective communities for all the support over the past several years. We look forward to the day when we can celebrate everybody who helped this project along."

The \$405 million gaming and family entertainment destination is projected to bring about 1,500 permanent jobs and "thousands" of construction jobs to the Beloit area, according to the Ho-Chunk announcement.

"The City of Beloit is committed to working with the Ho-Chunk Nation on this development," Luther said. "Not only will the Ho-Chunk Nation bring economic development, job growth and entertainment activity to our community, but the (Ho-Chunk) Nation will also provide cultural and historical education to our residents. We look forward to welcoming the Ho-Chunk Nation back to their home."

Beloit City Council President Regina Dunkin said Wednesday's announcement was "a win for the entire Greater Beloit region."

"An entertainment destination of this magnitude is a win for the entire Greater Beloit region and will provide job opportunities for our residents," Dunkin said. "We send our sincerest appreciation to Governor Evers for his careful review and approval of this project. Congratulations to the Ho-Chunk Nation, we look forward to seeing your success in Beloit."



Once open, a revenue sharing agreement between the Nation, City of Beloit and Rock County would see millions of dollars in unrestricted revenue. Based on a 2018 analysis of the anticipated revenue, it is estimated that local impact payments of \$5.2 million annually could be paid to the city and county. The revenue sharing between the city and county would be split 70% for the city and 30% for the county. The intergovernmental agreement currently in effect between the city and the Nation states that 2% net win proceeds will be given to the city and county.

As previously reported by the Beloit Daily News, the project is expected to be constructed by the Nation in phases, Greendeer said.

“Once the design is finalized we will be better able to predict when we will be able to finish the project,” Greendeer said. “It’s dependent on a number of factors. The plans have not been finalized quite yet and we don’t know how the phasing will work.”

When asked about if an updated economic impact study for the project would publicly be released, Greendeer stated the financials of the project would remain confidential and would not be released.

Once fully-developed, the site may feature a 300-room hotel, 5 restaurants and 2,200 slots along with 50 table games in the casino. The project is expected to also include a 40,000-square-foot water park, an employee child care facility and 30,000-square-foot conference center and entertainment venue.

The Beloit City Council is scheduled to meet on Thursday to make a third amendment to the intergovernmental agreement between the Nation and the city that calls for an extension of the agreement until June 30, 2022. The council will meet at 5:30 p.m. on Thursday to review the proposed extension. The public may attend in-person at Beloit City Hall, 100 State St. or virtually attend by calling (224) 501-3412, access code 223-496-261.

Casino history



The idea for a tribal casino in Beloit dates back to the 1990s. A referendum on a tribal casino in Beloit was approved by a majority of Beloit voters in 1999.

The Bad River Lake Superior Chippewa and the St. Croix Chippewa made a proposal to establish a casino in Beloit, but in 2001, the application to place the land for the casino in trust was rejected by the U.S. Department of Interior. Then, the casino proposal was rejected by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 2009.

In 2009, the Ho-Chunk Nation purchased 30 acres of land where the Chippewa bands had planned to build a casino. The Ho-Chunk purchased 41 acres of land in the area from the City of Beloit in 2013 and moved forward with its own casino project application starting in 2012.

On April 16, 2020, the U.S. Department of Interior approved the Ho-Chunk proposal for a Beloit casino by issuing an approval of land into trust status for a portion of the 70-acre property.

On March 24, 2021, Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers gave approval to the first part of a two-part determination for the Beloit casino proposal.

Austin Montgomery



Evers said he agreed with the U.S. Department of the Interior's decision from April of 2020 that 32 acres of land be designated for the project in trust status adjacent to Interstate 39/90 near Willowbrook and Colley roads. The move puts the project one step closer to realizing a dream that's been decades in the making.

Ho-Chunk Nation Public Relations Officer Ryan Greendeer said there was no timeline for construction yet, while Beloit City Manager Lori Curtis Luther said there is "a real possibility" of the project going into construction this year. Luther added that construction timeline is "a realistic timeframe."

"As we work to bounce back from this pandemic, we must do everything we can to support economic development in communities across our state," Evers said. "The Ho-Chunk Nation and local officials in Beloit and Rock County have been working together toward providing jobs and long-term economic support in the region, and this is an important step forward in making the Beloit casino a reality."

Evers' action puts the land in trust status for the Ho-Chunk Nation for the purpose of gaming that would be "in the best interest of the Ho-Chunk Nation and would not be detrimental to the surrounding community," a news release from Evers' office said.

