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Tohono O'odhams planning resort, casino in W. Valley

by **Max Jarman** - Jan. 30, 2009 12:00 AM

A southern Arizona tribe's plans for a "Las Vegas-style" resort hotel, casino and convention center near the West Valley's sports complexes could create up to 6,000 jobs and boost the area's status as an entertainment destination.

The \$600 million West Valley Resort at Northern Avenue would be the Tohono O'odham Nation's fourth casino and the state's largest.

It would be built on 134 acres at 91st and Northern avenues, a few miles from University of Phoenix Stadium, Jobing.com Arena and the new spring-training facility for the Los Angeles Dodgers and Chicago White Sox.

It also would be close to Sun City and other retirement communities.

The plan has several hurdles to clear, including approval from the federal government. The project, on a site adjacent to Glendale and Peoria, gained support from Peoria's mayor but received a more lukewarm reception from Glendale's city manager.

Alan Meister, who was hired to assess the economic impact of the project on the state and neighboring communities, said the addition of a 600-room resort hotel and casino to the area's existing sports facilities would create an entertainment hot spot.

Meister's economic-impact study projects the resort would draw 1.2 million visitors a year and generate annual sales in the \$300 million range. Construction on what would be the state's 23rd casino is expected to begin late this year or early next.

The study estimates that the project would bring 6,000 construction jobs to the area during the two-year building phase and employ 3,200 people when open, sometime in 2012. Meister noted the annual payroll would be about \$140 million.

The tribe bought the property five years ago with part of the \$30 million it received in federal compensation for 9,880 acres that was flooded with the construction of Painted Rock Dam near Gila Bend.

Before the tribe can open the casino, the property must be designated as tribal reservation land and put into a federal trust.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs holds all reservation lands in trust for the benefit of tribal members and must approve any property additions.

Allen Anspach, the bureau's Western regional director, said the approval process could be lengthy and will ultimately rest with newly appointed Interior Secretary Ken Salazar.

Anspach is in favor of the deal, though.

"Generally, we are supportive of tribes taking land into trust," he said. "It promotes, in this case, economic development."

Ned Norris Jr., chairman of the 28,000 member Tohono O'odham Nation, doesn't expect problems with the land designation. He noted that the land was purchased to replace property the tribe had lost and that it must, according to law, be placed in trust and become part of the reservation.

Anspach agreed that because the land was purchased in a land settlement, it should help the process, as could the change in administration in Washington.

The Bush administration took a "hard look" at such applications, he said.

Peoria Mayor Bob Barrett said the project "would be a huge economic boon to the community."

But Glendale Councilwoman Joyce Clark, who represents the area around the proposed casino, called the plan "absolutely awful" when she heard about it Thursday.

Clark said she would worry about people wasting their needed money.

"At least thus far, they've (casinos) been far enough away that people had to be deliberative and make a trek," she said.

The West Valley resort would be the northwest Valley's first casino.

Glendale City Manager Ed Beasley said he had concerns about the project but declined to elaborate.

Glendale Mayor Elaine Scruggs did not return calls for comment.

The prospect of 6,000 new construction jobs would seem to be good news to the state's building industry, which cut more than 40,000 positions last year.

Yet the tribe's announcement comes at a time when the recession is taking its toll on casinos.

The state on Wednesday reported a 16 percent drop in the revenue-based payment it receives from the casinos each quarter. It was the largest drop since the state signed its first gaming compacts with the tribes in 1993. Arizona tribes operate casinos under

compacts with the state. The compacts, among other things, regulate how many casinos each tribe can operate.

Norris believes the economy can improve by the time the resort is slated to open.

"We have to be optimistic," he said.

Norris said that the tribe has contacted other tribes that operate casinos in Maricopa County and that they were receptive to another player.

Harold Baugus, CEO of Gila River Gaming Enterprises, said he had just heard about the project and couldn't comment.

Sheila Morago, executive director of the Arizona Indian Gaming Association, said the Tohono O'odham Nation is one of two tribes that are able to open a new casino in Arizona.

The Navajo Nation is allowed four but has no casinos in Arizona. It opened its first casino last year near Gallup, N.M., and plans five more in New Mexico and Arizona, including one near Flagstaff.

The Tohono O'odham Nation, based in Sells, is allowed four.

It now operates three in southern Arizona, including the recently opened Desert Diamond casino hotel near Tucson. With 1,089 slot machines, 26 poker tables and 25 blackjack tables, it is the state's largest.

The West Valley casino would have a similar amount of tables and gaming devices but would be considerably larger, said Scott Sirois, CEO of Tohono O'odham Gaming Enterprises.

Although some tribes hire outside firms to operate their casinos, the Tohono O'odhams have always run their own operations.

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