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The Cowlitz Tribe received the answer it wanted Thursday from the Bureau of Indian Affairs: Proceed with plans to establish a 152-acre reservation on Interstate 5 near La Center and build a mega-casino complex. But that green light from the Department of Interior answers just one question. Many questions remain, and until more answers are forthcoming, we see no cause for celebration by casino supporters or surrender by the project's opponents. Among those questions:

What's next in the legal battle? At least two sources insist this is far from a done deal. Tom Hunt, spokesman for the anti-casino group Citizens Against Reservation Shopping (Columbian publisher Scott Campbell is a member), said: "There will be protracted battles here."

And Justin Martin, spokesman for the Grand Ronde tribe that operates Spirit Mountain Casino 60 miles southwest of Portland, made this comment in Friday's Oregonian: "This is not a done deal by any stretch." The Grand Ronde tribe has the clout — financial and otherwise — to continue protecting its status as the closest tribal casino to Portland. (The Cowlitz casino would

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be 15 miles from Portland.) A few years ago, Spirit Mountain overtook Multnomah Falls as the state's leading tourist attraction.

Does the Cowlitz Tribe really need a tribal casino? Some statistics indicate otherwise. Tribal casinos, according to the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988, are intended to be "a means of promoting tribal economic development, self-sufficiency and strong tribal governments." But according to the 2000 Census, median income of Cowlitz Tribe members ranked highest of all tribes in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, and 18th among 495 tribes nationwide. As we reported three years ago, that median income was about \$43,654 per household, just shy of the statewide figure (\$45,776.) The 2000 Census also showed the Cowlitz Tribe with a 3.8 percent unemployment rate, compared with what at the time was a statewide rate of 6.2 percent. State Rep. Ed Orcutt, R-Kalama, on Thursday described the Cowlitz casino as "absolutely unnecessary. The Cowlitz Tribe, as a whole, is not an impoverished tribe."

Even with Thursday's green light, when could the Cowlitz Tribe dream become a reality, and how will they pay for it? The most optimistic projection lists two years for construction, with an opening in three years, but that won't happen without financial support that is lacking at this point. The Cowlitz have partnered with the Mohegan Tribe of Connecticut and the Paskenta Band of the Nomlaki Indians of California, but tribal casinos nationwide (especially the Mohegan's) have been ravaged by financial difficulties during the recession. In July, when the CEO for the Mohegan Tribal Gaming Authority said the deal with the Cowlitz remained "very viable," the authority was facing a \$1.6 billion debt.

How will local municipalities, chambers of commerce and other groups respond to the latest news? Surely it troubles city councils in La Center, Woodland and Vancouver; plus chambers of commerce in Battle Ground and Vancouver — all of which have formally opposed the casino.

What's next for La Center? Perhaps the city can benefit somewhat from nontribal economic development at the I-5 junction, but that's long-term. Short-term, there's a huge threat on the horizon for La Center's cardrooms, which provide tax revenue that makes up three-fourths of the city's general fund.

These lingering questions mean there won't be any ribbon-cuttings at any local tribal casino anytime soon. And considering the net negative impact such a project would have on the local quality of life, the continued uncertainty is a good thing.

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