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La Center has reached a crossroads. Does the city council act as past councils and oppose any negotiations with the Cowlitz Tribe regarding its proposed casino? Or, does it take a different approach and try to work with the tribe to mitigate the impact of a mega-casino on the small city?

The path the city takes won't become clear until 2011. The council has a meeting Wednesday, but the casino will not be on the agenda. The city's attorney is on vacation so the council will wait before tackling the issue. The council may set a date for a workshop on the issue.

Cowlitz reservation changes casino picture - The Columbian

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 28 December 2010 08:05 -

On Thursday, the Bureau of Indian Affairs announced it has approved the Cowlitz Tribe's application to establish a 152-acre reservation at the Interstate 5 junction near La Center. The decision leaves La Center city officials with a choice: talk with the tribe or mount a legal battle against the casino.

But if past stances by current council members are any indication, the decision should be straightforward. Several of the current council members have voiced support for talking with the tribe.

"The new council is not slamming the door in anybody's face, nor are we laying down to be run over," Mayor Jim Irish said.

In June, the council decided to extend a hand to leaders of the Cowlitz Tribe to foster a government-to-government relationship and open the lines of communication. Irish made initial contact with Cowlitz Chairman William Iyall, who agreed to a meeting, but the meeting has not yet occurred.

Councilwoman Linda Tracy was the only member to oppose the action. Councilmen Randy Williams and Greg Thornton were appointed to the council following the meeting. Williams said he supported the council's decision; Thornton didn't want to comment at the time because he wasn't up to speed on the issue.

In November 2009, Councilman Bill Birdwell was re-elected, and Councilman Al Luiz was elected to his first term. Both voiced support during the election for talking with the tribe in order to protect the interests of the city.

Luiz said Monday that his position hasn't changed.

"Even if I had changed my mind, the citizens spoke loud and clear at elections," he said. "I feel morally responsible to follow what I said I would do."

While several council members have supported talking with tribal leaders, they've also opposed the proposed location of the casino, mainly because of the potential economic impact on the city. Taxes on the city's four nontribal cardrooms account for about 75 percent of the city's \$4 million general fund revenue.

"The city of La Center is still against the casino at the junction because of the social and economic impacts to the city of La Center," Irish said.

The city is currently working to annex land to stretch the city limits west to Interstate 5 to allow for industrial development along the I-5 corridor and help the city to diversify its tax base. The city has also talked with the cardroom owners about relocating to the junction once the annexation is complete, Irish said.

"I want to make it very clear that there is no way we are going to forsake or give up or do anything to hurt our cardrooms," he said.

The current council's willingness to communicate with the tribe is an about-face from past councils' stances.

Past city councils have refused to negotiate with the tribe, turning down the tribe's offers to help extend sewer lines from the city of La Center to the proposed casino site and to compensate the city up to \$3 million annually for 10 years for lost tax revenues from its four nontribal cardrooms.

Despite past actions, Irish said tribal leaders have said they are still willing to communicate with the city.

"If the tribe is willing to discuss, they're in the driver's seat now," Irish said.

Cardrooms vs. casino

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Four entities that haven't relented on their opposition to the casino are the nontribal cardrooms in La Center.

On Friday, John Brockmier, who works for the public affairs firm Shamrock 51 Productions and represents the cardrooms, sent an e-mail to La Center council members. In the e-mail, Brockmier said the cardrooms will continue to adamantly oppose the location of the proposed Cowlitz casino.

"We are extremely committed to this mission and strongly believe that a number of valid opportunities still exist to terminate the site at the La Center junction," he wrote.

Just days before the BIA announced its decision, a Washington, D.C., attorney representing the cardrooms submitted a letter to the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the U.S. Department of the Interior, which oversees the BIA. The letter alleges improper management and lack of oversight of the environmental review of the tribe's application by the regional office of the BIA.

The letter, written by Guy Martin of Perkins Coie law firm, raises concerns about the objectivity of the environmental impact statement and the contractor that provided the findings.

"Documents we obtained ... indicate that the Tribe was very actively, and inappropriately, involved in the preparation of the (environmental impact statement) by (the contractor, Analytical Environmental Services), far beyond the role legally permissible for a cooperating agency," Martin wrote.

Cardroom officials have not returned The Columbian's calls for comment.

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