

Inslee will have final say on Spokane Tribe's contested casino plan

Written by Administrator
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The governor has the final say on whether the Spokane Tribe can build a big casino resort complex in a Spokane suburb. Opposing the plan are many Spokane business leaders and the Kalispel Tribe, which already operates a casino in Airway Heights.

AIRWAY HEIGHTS, Spokane County — In some ways, Gov. Jay Inslee controls the economic future of the Spokane Tribe of Indians.

Inslee has the final say on whether the tribe can build a big casino resort complex in a suburb of Spokane.

The federal government has approved the off-reservation project, but it is strongly opposed by many Spokane business leaders and by the Kalispel Tribe, which already operates a lucrative casino in Airway Heights.

Inslee is weeks, if not months, away from making his decision, the governor's office said. He has until June 2016 to decide. Most Read Stories

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[Struggling Haggen files for bankruptcy protection, parts with Southwest co-CEO](#) Inslee's office declined to say if the governor was leaning in a particular direction. Meanwhile, the Spokane Tribe is using the time to prepare a case for building the \$400 million casino resort, which it predicts will support 5,000 jobs and provide a major economic boost to the impoverished tribe. "It will really help with high unemployment among tribal members," said Carol Evans, the first woman to chair the tribe. "The revenue will help with health care, scholarships, elder programs and cultural programs." Unemployment among members of the Spokane Tribe has been more than 30 percent for years. Tribal members also make only about two-thirds of the per capita income of other Stevens County residents. The tribe, which has about 2,900 members,

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purchased land in the suburb of Airway Heights and petitioned the federal government for a rarely granted exemption that would allow it to open a casino away from its reservation. The Kalispel Tribe, which more than a decade ago won just such an exemption in order to open the Northern Quest Casino in Airway Heights, objected to the proposal. The Kalispels, who have about 400 members, were joined by Spokane business leaders who object to additional casinos in the area, and fear the new project might help lead to the closure of Fairchild Air Force Base. Much of the opposition to the proposed casino involves its location, only about a mile from the gates of Fairchild, the largest single employer in the Spokane area. Some business leaders contend the new casino would encroach on Fairchild, which could prompt the Air Force to close the base in the future. The Air Force did not object to the casino in the exhaustive environmental review, the Spokanes said. They also said they have worked with Air Force officials to address any concerns. The tribe said concerns for the future of the base are a red herring to eliminate a potential competitor to the Northern Quest Casino. Several state politicians also have spoken out against the casino proposal, fearing an explosion of off-reservation casinos, especially in the Seattle area. Tribes will be "in a mad rush to locate casinos as close to the downtown core of every major city," former Gov. Mike Lowry and former Secretary of State Ralph Munro wrote in The Seattle Times recently.

The Spokane Tribe said the greater Spokane region comprises its traditional territory and that the Kalispels, who hail from the northeastern corner of the state, should not have a monopoly there. "The Kalispels were allowed to build on our ancestral homelands," Evans said, noting the situation was unique nationally. The Kalispels contend that the Spokanes never made a move to build a casino in Airway Heights until Northern Quest turned out to be a success. A second casino in Airway Heights "would have a devastating impact" on the tribe's economy and ability to provide for its members, the Kalispels said. The Spokane Tribe has reached a deal with the Hard Rock brand to operate the new casino if it is approved by the governor. "We believe the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino would offer a unique experience," former tribal Chairman Rudy Peone said in announcing the signing of a letter of intent in June. The Hard Rock has a flagship casino in Las Vegas and locations in other communities. The Spokanes first applied for permission to build an off-reservation casino in 2006, but the U.S. Department of the Interior did not grant the approval until mid-June of this year. The agency has granted only a handful of off-reservation casino approvals. The decision was based on the many jobs and public services it would bring the tribe while not hurting the surrounding community, the agency said. The Spokane Tribe Economic Project includes a casino, hotel and retail spaces. Evans said she is surprised by the level of opposition. She wondered if a private developer proposing a similar project would get such opposition. "We are looking at growing the market," Evans said, "not upsetting any competition."

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