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BELOIT — Parties involved with the Ho-Chunk Nation's Beloit casino project are testing the waters to see if there's support to move the plan ahead at the federal level after President-elect Donald Trump takes office Jan. 20.

Representatives from Ho-Chunk met with the Department of Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs in early December to ensure the project would not be adversely affected by the presidential transition, officials said.

The move follows the tribe's request to Beloit city staff asking for local state legislators to reaffirm support for the project and to help line up Wisconsin's congressional delegation behind the plan. If approved at the federal level, the plan would head for Gov. Scott Walker's desk for approval or denial.

Currently the plan is still pending with BIA, with the project's environmental impact study complete.

"We wanted to give (Ho-Chunk) our full support on this, and we are hoping for cooperation from all sides," said Beloit City Council President Dave Luebke.

State Reps. Amy Loudenbeck (R-Clinton) and Mark Spreitzer (D-Beloit) urged Congressman Mark Pocan (D-WI) and U.S. Sens. Ron Johnson (R-WI) and Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) to continue to support the project following Dec. 6 correspondence with the city.

In the Ho-Chunk meeting with BIA officials, the tribe was told the casino plan would not face any administrative setbacks regarding plan specifics with Trump taking office, Pocan said. The plan would go before Trump's yet-to-be-approved interior secretary for final federal approval, something that could take three months to a year after being sent back from the BIA regional office.

On Dec. 13 Trump picked Ryan Zinke to lead the department, who some view as an advocate for conserving public lands and tribal interests.

“What we don’t want to happen is the project getting hurt by federal bureaucracy,” Pocan said.

The casino project, planned for near Colley and Willowbrook roads adjacent to Interstate 39/90, could encompass 73.5 acres and include a hotel, conference center and spur other developments in the area if approved, according to 2015 city documents.

In January 2015, Walker denied a casino project put forward by the Menominee Nation in Kenosha due to a possible “long term economic hit” to the state’s budget with a potential loss of hundreds of millions of dollars, Walker said at the time. Prior to heading to Walker’s desk, the Kenosha plan took over six years to be reviewed and approved by the BIA.

Former Ho-Chunk President Jon Greendeer previously said in early 2015 the Beloit proposal should go through a quick review process due to a 1990s compact between Ho-Chunk and the state specifying the tribe could open one additional Class Three gaming facility. Current President Wilfrid Cleveland could not immediately be reached for comment regarding the project.

Minimal information on the plan is listed on ho-chunkforward.com, a site dedicated to providing updates on the tribe’s gaming progress. There is a plan “to run short-term, limited operations to create revenue for a larger operation” with the Beloit project, the site said. Ho-Chunk has “additional financing available to start the process” and plans say the project could “happen during Fiscal Year 2017,” according to the site.

In March 2015, the city and tribe approved a three-year project extension through 2018. Shortly after the extension of the intergovernmental agreement, a land deal of \$1.87 million was approved for the expanded project.

The land sale also follows two failed attempts in 2013 and 2014 by the city to secure a Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant from the U.S.

Department of Transportation (DOT) for road extensions of Colley and Willowbrook roads. TIGER grants are highly competitive, and since 2014, only two projects were approved in Wisconsin. The DOT allocated \$500 million in 2016 for various transportation improvements across the country.

The project's tentative financial agreement sits with the city, county and Ho-Chunk. Ho-Chunk has agreed to pay two percent of the net win proceeds generated by the casino, and 30 percent of the two percent revenue would be allocated for the county. Payments of net win proceeds would be in lieu of property taxes at the proposed development, much of which would be on designated tribal land not subject to the tax.

Spreitzer continues to support the project, and urged federal authorities to take action. In 2012, Spreitzer opposed the intergovernmental agreement as a member of the Beloit City Council. At the time, he said he was concerned with the limited protections for the city in the overall plan.

"We've been waiting a very long time to see if this can move forward or not," Spreitzer said.

Plans say the project could add up to 2,000 jobs to the area, according to 2015 project documents.

"The city, county and Ho-Chunk have worked together in good faith on a strong application for the proposed casino," Loudonbeck said.

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