

Cherokee exploring dorm housing for casino workers

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 09 March 2022 09:06 -

“We have to do what’s necessary to support the one enterprise that’s paying all the bills for everything,” Principal Chief Richard Sneed told Tribal Council [March 3](#) , asking for approval to purchase the property proposed as the project site.

The 9.5-acre property, currently owned by enrolled member Morgan Owle Crisp, is a “relatively level grassy field” bordered by Don Lambert Road to the east and Casino Trail to the south, with forested property to the north and west, according to a geotechnical report Sneed presented Council last week. In July 2021, the parcel appraised for \$2.6 million, according to the proposed [resolution](#) , but Crisp was willing to sell for \$2.5 million.

However, after an at-times contentious exchange it became clear that, given the results of the geotechnical report, Tribal Council was not going to approve the purchase at the price proposed. Sneed withdrew the legislation to renegotiate with the property owner. However, he told Council, it’s imperative that they do something to address the casino’s [labor shortage](#) — and soon.

“Competition is now here. It’s in Charlotte,” he said, referencing the July 2021 opening of the [Catawba Two Kings Casino](#) owned by the Catawba Indian Nation. “We can either invest in the enterprise that’s paying all the bills to give it the support it needs, or don’t. But know that there will be consequences for not doing so.”

‘A lot of open positions’

During the summer of 2019 — before the pandemic and before completion of the Cherokee casino’s fourth hotel tower and new [convention center](#) — the Cherokee location carried about 200 open positions and Valley River had 60-70. By July 2021, those numbers had doubled for existing operations, with an additional 200 positions related to the upcoming expansion bringing the total number of openings in Cherokee to 600.

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Now, Valley River has 90 open positions and Cherokee 789. On top of that, the tribe is carrying 135 open positions with an additional 35 positions frozen. The Cherokee Indian Hospital Authority is currently advertising 75 jobs.

“That’s a lot of open positions,” said Sneed.

There’s not much local workforce left to pull from, and an intractable housing market means that it’s more difficult than ever for people to relocate to Western North Carolina for a job in Cherokee.

Workforce issues are the reason the tribe never built the much-discussed water park complex, said Sneed. Such a facility would have required an additional 250 full-time positions, and tribal leaders knew it would be near impossible to fill them given all the other casino expansion plans in the works.

The undeveloped property Sneed — on behalf of the Lands Acquisition Committee, which he chairs — asked Council to purchase is located close to the casino and would be an ideal place to house workers, multiple members of Council agreed.

Soil stability concerns

However, further site analysis revealed issues with soil stability and land usability that concerned members of Council.

The site is home to a significant amount of construction fill soil. The geotechnical analysis, which Sneed presented, stated that the soils were tested at two-foot increments 10 feet deep, and that fill soils were well compacted with the trace amounts of construction debris present falling within tolerable limits. The report made various recommendations for construction, testing and observation to safely build on the area — but noted that without completely removing and replacing the existing fill soil, it would be impossible to eliminate the risk of soil settlement, which could cause safety issues for any structures built there.

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“Even with the recommended observation taken into construction it is possible that unsuitable bearing existing fill may go undetected,” said an additional section of the report that Yellowhill Rep. T.W. Saunooke read. “The acceptance of the risk lies solely with the owner.”

Saunooke, who has 25 years of experience in the construction industry, recalled a specific project he was part of in which a contractor was paid to haul trash dirt from the site and dump it on the property in question.

“There’s no way that we should be putting a multi-story facility on top of that without excavating it out and taking out the trash dirt,” he said.

That would cost something like \$750,000, Saunooke estimated, and the purchase price should account for that cost.

Additionally, he said, the price tag should account for the fact that about 3 of the 9.5 acres are not usable for construction. About 1.07 of the 9.5 acres is actually a state road, not buildable land. Another two acres are in the floodway, Saunooke said.

“The price has got to come way down to make it economical for us to even be able to move forward with it,” he said.

Vice Chairman Albert Rose, who also sits on the Lands Acquisition Committee, said that despite initially voting to move forward with the purchase, he can’t support it at the proposed price given what he knows now.

“You don’t want to buy it and put \$750,00 into it,” he said. “You want to buy it and be able to be pad ready.”

Balancing housing efforts

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Big Cove Rep. Teresa McCoy followed Saunooke's comments with a fiery exchange with Sneed that at times turned personal, berating him for supporting a workforce housing project like the one proposed while tribal members still wait for housing opportunities.

"I will not sit here as a Council member of this tribe and raise my hand to support housing for anybody but our people and our tribal members," said McCoy, accusing Sneed of championing the project to benefit himself and his friends. Sneed replied that he was presenting the resolution as chair of the Lands Acquisition Committee, which had voted unanimously to pursue the project.

"The idea that somehow this is my project, it's not true," he said. "So I take offense to that."

"I take offense to you," said McCoy, walking out of the room moments afterward.

Later in the meeting, Sneed addressed McCoy's assertion that the tribe should lay off housing projects for non-enrolled people until it finishes helping its own members. The tribe must champion both kinds of projects, he said, and it has been [doing so](#). Sneed told Council that the Department of Housing made 70 families homeowners last fiscal year, the highest single-year number in more than three decades. The tribe currently has 149 low-income rental units and 160 market-rate units, with ongoing projects bringing 64 additional units to the finish line. Other projects in the pipeline will bring roughly 1,000 additional units online over the next five years or so.

"This is not an either-or proposition," said Sneed. "We must do both. If we choose not to, there will be consequences for choosing not to — that's all I'm saying. So it's a business decision."

Most Council members seemed to agree that expanded workforce housing is a must if the tribe's casino enterprise is to thrive. But they also balked at the proposed price given the issues with soil stability and floodplain lines. The body voted unanimously to withdraw the resolution, giving Sneed and the Lands Acquisition Committee a chance to renegotiate the price and bring a new version forward at a future Council meeting.

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“It just needs to be renegotiated down,” said Saunooke. “\$2.5 (million) is just, it’s unacceptable.”

Read more <https://smokymountainnews.com/news/item/33195-cherokee-exploring-dorm-housing-for-casino-workers>