

Osage casinos no longer in jeopardy

Federal officials approve three Osage land-into-trust applications. Chief Red Eagle signs applications Aug. 23

Article | August 24, 2011 | By [Benny Polacca](#)



The Tulsa Osage Casino. Photo by Benny Polacca/Osage News

The federal Department of the Interior has approved the three land-into-trust applications for the Osage Casinos in Skiatook, Ponca City and Tulsa. Osage Nation government officials signed the applications on Tuesday (Aug. 23).

“We are pleased with the work of the Department of Interior and how they expedited the process for us,” Principal Chief John Red Eagle said in a statement issued shortly after the applications were signed. “Getting tribal land placed into trust can often take years, so we feel fortunate to have this matter resolved in such a short amount of time.”

Government officials have said the land-into-trust application process could take between six months and three years before being approved. The three Osage Casino applications approved will place about 50 acres into federal trust.

The Aug. 23 signing took place at the Osage Casino’s central office next to the Tulsa casino. Officials present at the signing were Chief Red Eagle, Osage Casinos CEO Neil Cornelius and Bureau of Indian Affairs Regional Director (Eastern Oklahoma Region) Charles Head, according to a news release.

Chris White, executive director of governmental affairs for Chief Red Eagle’s office, told the Osage News the applications were initially approved by Larry Echohawk (Interior Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs) on July 8. Those applications were then subject to a 30-day public comment period before they could be signed.

The 30-day public comment period, which is required in accordance with the Code of Federal Regulations, ended Aug. 18 without protests filed. According to the Federal Register, which publishes land-into-trust actions, the Osage Casino applications comprise just over 50 acres. The Ponca City casino application covers 15 acres, Skiatook 7.5 acres and Tulsa’s covers 27.66 acres.

Moving forward

The trust application approvals close a chapter of worry on whether federal and state authorities would partially or entirely shut down the Nation’s gaming operations because the lands holding the three casinos were not placed into trust as required by federal law and the National Indian Gaming Commission.

White, who is the former Ponca City Osage casino general manager, praised the application approvals during the ON Gaming Commission meeting on Aug. 9. “It allows our gaming enterprise to move forward.”

At the time the casinos were built, Osage government officials contended the NIGC approved the Osages’ claim that Osage County was also the reservation, said a former ON government official who requested anonymity in a March 2009 Osage News article. The state signed the compact as well, a de facto recognition that the county is also the reservation, the official said.

The Ponca City casino has 56 employees and 223 slot machines; the Skiatook casino has 54 employees and 200 slots; and the Tulsa casino has 313 employees and nearly 1,100 slots.

In the meantime, efforts to hire a full-time general manager for the Ponca City casino are ongoing.

White, who left the Ponca City casino last year for his appointed position in Chief Red Eagle’s office, said one of the concerns among casino employees was whether their jobs were safe, considering the casinos’ legal status at the time was unknown. The situation also impacted interest in filling the general manager position, he said during the Aug. 18 ON Gaming Enterprise Board meeting.

Joe Olujic, Chief Operating Officer for Osage Casino, said the Ponca City GM position is being advertised in the Tulsa World during the Aug. 18 meeting. The job description also appears online at the www.osagecasinos.com Web site.

The land-into-trust application approvals come nearly two months after the U.S. Supreme Court denied the Nation’s request to hear the reservation status case against the Oklahoma Tax Commission.

The federal case against the state Tax Commission began 11-years-ago when the Nation sued the entity for taxing Osage citizens living on land that the Nation claimed was still, and had always been, reservation land, also known as the boundaries of Osage County. Since that time the case has been to the 10th Circuit Court of Federal Appeals twice, in which the federal court denied to hear a rehearing of the Nation’s case. The Nation appealed to the Supreme Court in October of last year and the High Court ultimately declined to hear the appeal on June 27.

Despite exhausting all appeals in the reservation status case, Chief Red Eagle and White remained optimistic that Interior officials would approve the trust applications. They also praised BIA regional officials, in addition to Interior officials, for working to expedite the trust applications’ processing.

Echohawk (Pawnee) is a former Idaho Attorney General who was confirmed Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs in May 2009 after being appointed by President Barack Obama, according to the Interior department’s Web site. He is the first Native American elected to a state attorney general position and served two consecutive terms in the Idaho House of Representatives in the 1980s.

Location

Osage Casino - Tulsa
951 W 36th Street North
Tulsa, OK
United States