



United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240



JAN 13 2009

The Honorable Eugene Bigboy, Sr.
Chairman, Bad River Band of Lake Superior
Chippewa Indians
P.O. Box 39
Odanah, Wisconsin 54861

The Honorable Hazel Hindsley
President, St. Croix Chippewa Tribe
24663 Angeline Avenue
Webster, Wisconsin 54893

Dear Chairman Bigboy and President Hindsley:

On July 30, 2001, the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians and the St. Croix Chippewa Tribe (Tribes') submitted to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) an application to acquire in trust a 26-acre parcel of land in Beloit, Rock County, Wisconsin (Beloit Property). The Tribes propose to construct, develop, and manage a destination gaming resort complex and other uses incidental thereto on the parcel.

Background

In explaining the Department of the Interior's (Department) decision, it is important to begin by restating the core principles that underlie the land acquisitions regulations. The Part 151 regulations implement the trust land acquisition authority given to the Secretary by the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (IRA), 25 U.S.C. § 465. The IRA was primarily intended to redress the effects of the discredited policy of allotment, which had sought to divide up the tribal land base among individual Indians and non-Indians, and to destroy tribal governments and tribal identity. To assist in restoring the tribal land base, the IRA gives the Secretary the authority to: 1) return "to tribal ownership the remaining surplus lands of any Indian reservation" that had been opened to sale or disposal under the public land laws; 2) consolidate Indian ownership of land holdings within reservations by acquiring and exchanging interests of both Indians and non-Indians; and 3) acquire, in his discretion, interests in lands "within or without existing reservations." The IRA also contains provisions strengthening tribal governments and facilitating their operation. The policy of the IRA, which is just the opposite of allotment, is to provide a tribal land base on which tribal communities, governed by tribal governments, could exist and flourish. Consistent with the policy, the Secretary has typically exercised his trust land acquisition authority to take lands into trust that are within, or in close proximity to, existing reservations.

The IRA has nothing to do directly with Indian gaming. The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA), 25 U.S.C. § 2701 et. seq., adopted more than 50 years after the IRA, sets the criteria under which gaming activities can occur on Indian lands. One requirement is that if gaming is to occur on off-reservation lands, those lands must be trust lands “over which an Indian tribe exercises governmental power.” The authority to acquire trust lands, however, is derived from the IRA; no trust land acquisition authority is granted to the Secretary by IGRA. The Department has taken the position that although IGRA was intended to promote the economic development of tribes by facilitating Indian gaming operations, it was not intended to encourage the establishment of Indian gaming facilities on off-reservation land. Whether off-reservation land should be taken into trust for gaming purposes is a decision that must be made pursuant to the Secretary’s IRA authority.

Compliance with 25 C.F.R. Part 151

In a letter dated February 13, 2007, the Department made it clear that the Tribes’ land-into-trust application would receive a thorough and critical review under the Department’s land acquisition regulations in 25 C.F.R. Part 151. Our review of the Tribes’ application has identified several concerns, particularly with criteria in 25 C.F.R. §§ 151.3, 151.10(b), 151.10(c), and 151.11(b), as explained below.

A. 25 C.F.R. 151.3 Land acquisition policy.

The regulations, in 25 C.F.R. 151.3(a)(3), require the Department to make a determination that the acquisition of the land is necessary to facilitate tribal self-determination, economic development, or Indian housing. The justification provided with your land-into-trust application directed our attention to economic development as the key reason for seeking our approval of this application. The proposed gaming site is approximately 339 miles from the Bad River Reservation and approximately 332 miles from the St. Croix Reservation. The application suggests that the economic benefits to the Tribes’ would be a projected cash flow from casino operations at the Beloit gaming facility that could then be used to satisfy Tribal needs on the reservations.

B. 25 C.F.R. 151.10(b). The need of the Tribe for additional land.

The regulations, in 25 C.F.R. 151.10(b), require the Department to evaluate the need of the Tribe for additional land. The Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa owns approximately 24,493.03 acres of land in trust and the St. Croix Chippewa Tribe owns approximately 2,159.56 acres of land in trust. This application does not address a need for more land to support tribal housing, government infrastructure, or to resolve local land management conflicts. Rather, the application seeks a particular site of 26 acres, located approximately 300 miles away from the Tribes’ reservations, which has been selected due, principally, to its proximity to urban markets.

C. 25 C.F.R. 151.10(c). The purposes for which the land will be used.

The regulations, in 25 C.F.R. 151.10(c), require the Department to consider the purposes for which the land will be used. In this case, the land will be used for the development of a very

large off-reservation class III gaming facility. It is worth noting that both Tribes' already have at least one class III gaming facility located on their reservations.

D. 25 C.F.R. 151.11(b). The location of the land relative to State boundaries, and its distance from the boundaries of the Tribes' reservation.

The regulations, in 25 C.F.R. 151.11(b), require the Department to consider the location of the land relative to State boundaries and its distance from the boundaries of the Tribes' reservation. As the distance increases, the Secretary must give greater scrutiny to the Tribes' justification of anticipated benefits from the acquisition, and greater weight to the concerns of local governments. The Tribes' reservations and the proposed Beloit Property are located in the State of Wisconsin, approximately 300 miles apart. The Department is concerned that approval of this application would not support the option for tribal members to live on their existing reservations and to have meaningful employment opportunities at the proposed gaming establishment in Beloit because the proposed gaming establishment will not be located within a reasonable commuting distance from the Tribes' reservations.

In your application the St. Croix Tribe states that, "[g]aming expansion is to generate greatly needed financial support and create a diversified revenue base to increase, enhance and improve the quality of life of tribal and community members." The Bad River Band states that, "[r]evenue is sorely needed and will allow the Band to materially affect most if not all the governmental services provided to its members." Therefore, the primary expected benefit is the income stream from the gaming facility, which can be used to fund tribal services, develop tribal infrastructure, and provide per capita payments to tribal members. These expected benefits are all anticipated to provide a positive effect on reservation life regardless of the distance of the gaming facility from the reservations. The application describes the existing conditions of government operations on the reservations, including the unmet needs. However, the general descriptions do not provide sufficient detail to allow a determination by the Secretary on the specific benefits expected from the use of net gaming revenues.

The second benefit of the proposed gaming facility is the opportunity for job training and employment of tribal members living on the reservations. Your application says, "[t]he Beloit location provides a unique employment opportunity for tribal employees as well as non-tribal employees to be hired." The application also states, "The Beloit location will provide an excellent opportunity for significant career progression for those Tribal members who possess the education, training, and demonstrated skill and who wish to relocate" and "As new jobs at the Beloit Casino, particularly those in middle management and supervisory position, may attract people from our Reservation based casino operations, the opportunities from increased on-reservation employment will be increased." These statements indicate that the Tribes expect employment opportunities to increase for local residents but not to provide jobs directly to residents of the reservations. The location of the proposed gaming facility can have significant negative effects on reservation life. Because the proposed gaming facility is not within a commutable distance of the reservations, resident tribal members will either: a) decline the job opportunity if they desire to remain on the reservation; or b) move away from the reservation to take advantage of the job opportunities.

In either case, the negative impacts on reservation life could be considerable. In the first case, the operation of the gaming facility would not directly improve the employment rate of tribal members living on the reservations. A high unemployment rate, with its attendant social ills, is already a problem on the Tribes' reservations. A gaming operation on or close to the reservations would allow the Tribes to alleviate this situation by using the gaming facility as a conduit for job training and employment programs for tribal members. Provision of employment opportunities to reservation residents promotes a strong tribal government and tribal community. Employment of tribal members is an important benefit of tribal economic enterprises.

In the second case, the remote location of the proposed gaming facility may encourage reservation residents to leave the reservations for an extended period to take advantage of the job opportunities created by the tribal gaming facility. The potential departure of a significant number of reservation residents and their families could have serious and far-reaching implications for the remaining tribal communities and their continuity as communities. While the financial benefits of the proposed gaming facility might create revenues for the Tribes and may mitigate some potential negative impacts, the Tribes' application fails to carefully address and comprehensively analyze the potential negative impacts on reservation life and does not clearly demonstrate why these negative impacts should be outweighed by the financial benefits of tribal ownership of a remote gaming facility.

Decision

The Department's regulations, in 25 C.F.R. 151.3, state that no acquisition of land in trust status shall be valid unless the acquisition is approved by the Secretary. The Department has completed an evaluation of the Tribes' fee-to-trust application for the Beloit Property and has determined that it will not accept the property into trust.

The Department's evaluation of this off-reservation land-into-trust application has identified several concerns, as outlined above, that lead to a determination that the Department will not exercise its discretionary authority to take the parcel into trust. This decision is a final agency action consistent with the provisions of 25 C.F.R. 2.6(c).

Please be advised that since this land will not be accepted into trust, the proposed site does not qualify for Indian gaming pursuant to IGRA. It is our hope that the Department will be able to work with the Tribes to identify economic development opportunities that we can support mutually.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "G. Skibine", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

George T. Skibine
Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary
for Policy and Economic Development