

Written by Administrator
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The Department of the Interior announced Thursday it would approve the Cowlitz Tribe's application to take 152 acres in Clark County into trust, clearing a major government hurdle for a [134,150-square-foot casino](#) near La Center.

The complex, planned for just west of Interstate 5 about 15 miles north of the Columbia River, would be the closest casino to the Portland area. Its approval puts the Cowlitz Tribe ahead of several groups eyeing the region for a large-scale casino. The tribe says it could have a casino operating within three years.

In terms of competition for gambling money, the Cowlitz project more than any threatens Oregon's Spirit Mountain -- the Grand Ronde tribes' casino, about 60 miles southwest of Portland and the closest tribal casino to Oregon's biggest population center.

"It would clearly mean a significant economic impact for us and for Oregon," said Grand Ronde spokesman Justin Martin.

The Grand Ronde collect about one third of all tribal gaming business in Oregon, which hit about \$438 million last year. Martin said the Grand Ronde tribes have opposed the Cowlitz project, asserting it would be an off-reservation tribal casino. He said the Grand Ronde believes the Cowlitz lack the legal authority to operate a casino at all, given a U.S. Supreme Court ruling tribes recognized after 1934 can't take land into trust. The Cowlitz Tribe was formally recognized in 2000.

"This is not a done deal by any stretch," Martin said.

But the Cowlitz Tribe says the ruling doesn't apply to them and that the government examined the issue before giving its approval.

"Obviously the federal government doesn't think that's the case or they wouldn't have issued the decision," Cowlitz Tribe Chairman William Iyall said.

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Backers of a November ballot measure to authorize a private casino in east Multnomah County argued during the election that federal approval of the Cowlitz project would hurt the chances of any large casino project getting built in the metro area. They said Oregonians should approve a nontribal casino to beat the Cowlitz's entry as the first large casino in the local gambling market.

Oregonians [voted 2-to-1 against Measure 75](#) , which sought approval for a casino at the former Multnomah Greyhound Park dog track site in Wood Village.

The Cowlitz Tribe originally envisioned a casino-resort including an eight-story, 250-room hotel, but it will scale back the project initially, Iyall said.

"These are pretty difficult times, I've got to say," he said.

Instead, the tribe will build in phases, starting with the casino. The two-story building would have room for 135 gambling tables and 20 poker tables, and its plan includes a 5,000-seat convention and meeting venue that could also be used for music and entertainment.

Construction will start as soon as the tribe secures financing, Iyall said, and construction is expected to take two years. The casino could open in as few as three years.

The tribe has partnered with the Mohegan Tribe of Connecticut, which runs gambling operations on the East Coast and could give the venture some heft in funding the project.

"They have worked with us in lockstep," Iyall said. "They have expertise in this sort of casino development."

The project encountered some resistance in Clark County, particularly among the owners of several card clubs in La Center.

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The Clark County commissioners backed out of a memorandum of understanding with the tribe in 2009, citing concerns about the impact it would have on nearby housing and law enforcement.

Commissioner Marc Boldt said Thursday he was hopeful the county still has a solid relationship with the tribe and could work with leaders to address some of those concerns.

"The decision has been made," Boldt said. "We'll live with it, we'll deal with it, and we'll deal with the tribe as we would any other developer."

The reservation will be the tribe's first. It's been landless since the federal government seized its land in the 1860s.

"It's just a huge lift for the Cowlitz people that they've been waiting patiently for," Iyall said.

The tribe is based in Longview but plans to move its headquarters to the reservation. It also plans to build residences and a cultural center on the land.

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