

## No casino in the cards for Washington County, tribal president says

Written by Administrator

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The Prairie Island Indian Community's development of recently acquired acreage in Washington County could be years away and most likely will include housing or businesses other than a casino, the tribal president said Monday.

Shelley Buck acknowledged persistent public speculation that the tribe intends to build a casino in West Lakeland Township, just north of Afton. But she said the tribe purchased the 112-acre sod farm to replace land lost to a nuclear plant and Mississippi River flooding at its Goodhue County reservation.

"We want a safe place for our community, out of the shadow of the nuclear power and storage,

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and a place with room to grow and diversify, both housing and economically,” Buck said.

“It has nothing to do with a casino. It has everything to do with safe and secure land for our people and the future of our tribe. Everyone in our country deserves that right.”

Fewer than 200 members of the Prairie Island tribe live on the reservation, about 30 miles southeast of the Twin Cities, squeezed between Xcel Energy’s nuclear power plant and submerged land lost when Lock and Dam No. 3 was built in 1938, Buck said. A 2003 agreement with Xcel allowed the tribe to buy up to 1,500 acres within 50 miles of Prairie Island as compensation.

State land records show the tribe paid more than \$4.4 million to buy the sod farm, at \$39,350 an acre, northeast of where busy Manning Avenue intersects with Interstate 94.

The transaction, announced in March, was followed in June by an application to place the West Lakeland Township land in federal trust — protecting it from sale and freeing it from county taxation.

Gary Kriesel, the Washington County commissioner whose district includes the tribal property, said Monday he’s heard concern over a possible casino but that it was “way too premature to engage in that.” After meeting with tribal leaders, he said, “There’s nothing on a fast track that I sensed.”

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The county's interest in any future development, Krie-sel said, would relate to road use and traffic management.

"Pretty impressive group," he said of tribal leaders. "They have a legal right like any developer to determine existing laws and ordinances for what that property can be used for."

The Prairie Island community has more than 1,000 enrolled members, about half of them children, Buck said.

The small reservation is home to Treasure Island Resort and Casino, which began operating in 1986. The casino employs as many as 1,500 people and annually generates \$14 million in state and federal taxes, Buck said.

She wouldn't rule out consideration of a casino for the West Lakeland Township property, but said it's "not on our radar" and that the land currently is leased to a local farmer for agricultural use.

"Treasure Island's successful and we're doing very well with it. We continue to want to diversify our economic portfolio so we're not reliant on one source of income," she said.

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“Tribes have businesses from one spectrum to another that have nothing to do with casinos. When people automatically assume a casino, that’s what is offensive to me.”

On Tuesday the tribe will break ground for an \$86 million hotel expansion at Treasure Island that will add 300 rooms, a restaurant and an expanded water park. The expansion will connect to the existing hotel.

The Prairie Island community also owns the Mount Frontenac Golf Course near Red Wing, Minn., and two parcels of land near Hastings. Neither of those parcels — one about 20 acres and the other about 260 — has been developed, Buck said.

“There’s a lot of talk around the neighborhood about what is happening,” West Lakeland resident Marie Brenden said. Her family’s house and 6 acres of land, which they bought a year ago for \$1 million, abut the tribe’s new land.

Brenden said people wonder why the Prairie Island community would spend so much money to buy empty land near a busy freeway if they didn’t have a casino in mind.

“Now I have bigger concerns,” she said.

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