

Written by Administrator
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By MURRAY EVANS

OKLAHOMA CITY

The Cherokee Nation will be able to conduct gaming activities on newly acquired trust lands under a decision issued Wednesday by the U.S. Department of the Interior, but another American Indian tribe seeking to build a casino in Oklahoma City has been shut

out.

Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs Larry Echo Hawk announced in a statement the approval of the acquisition of 17 acres of land into trust for the Cherokee Nation. The land is located at the junction of U.S. Highway 62 and State Highway 82 south of Tahlequah in Cherokee County, tribal spokesman Mike Miller said.

The Interior Department also approved the acquisition of 405 acres for the Navajo Nation in Arizona.

But the department ruled that the Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma doesn't qualify for gaming under an exception to the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act. The law prohibits gaming on American Indian lands that were acquired in trust after the law was enacted in 1988, unless one of three exceptions applies.

One of those exceptions -- if the land is within a tribe's former reservation -- applied to the Cherokee request, Echo Hawk said. But he said none of the exceptions applied to the Shawnee Tribe, which wanted to put 104 acres of land in northeast Oklahoma City into trust so it could build a hotel and casino.

Greg Pitcher, chairman of Shawnee Development LLC, the tribe's economic development arm, did not return a message left Wednesday on his cell phone.

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Echo Hawk said the Navajo and Cherokee projects "represent an important economic development opportunity" for the tribes.

"We are committed to processing Indian gaming applications in a transparent manner, consistent with the law," he said.

The Cherokees intend to build a casino on the site and "we look forward to finalizing plans for the property and breaking ground as soon as possible," said David Stewart, the CEO of Cherokee Nation Businesses.

Cherokee Chief Chad Smith said the approval of the trust application "allows for continued economic growth for our hospitality industry while also providing a large new facility for education."

The latter is true, he said, because when the tribe built a gaming facility in Tahlequah a few years ago, "we built it to ultimately be converted to a (Cherokee) language immersion school building." Smith said the gaming facilities will be moved to the new trust property, allowing the immersion school -- now housed in temporary buildings on the tribe's Sequoyah Schools campus -- to expand.

The application by the Miami-based Shawnee Tribe drew opposition from numerous local, state and federal officials, including Gov. Brad Henry and the state's two U.S. senators, Tom Coburn and Jim Inhofe. Officials from nearby Remington Park -- which has seen a renaissance after a casino opened at the horse racing track in November 2005 -- said the Shawnee project likely would put the track out of business.

Remington Park's vice president and general manager, Scott Wells, said he was pleased the Interior Department "took into consideration overwhelming public opinion and did not cause an upheaval" to the state's horse industry, which he said was bolstered when voters passed State Question 712 in 2004, allowing for casinos at racetracks.

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