

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz.

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The Navajo Nation is set to build its first casino in Arizona on newly acquired trust land.

Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs Larry Echo Hawk announced this week that 405 acres east of Flagstaff were placed into trust for the

tribe.

The Navajo Nation Gaming Enterprise bought the land along Interstate 40 for \$7.4 million earlier this year and gifted it to the tribal government. Federal approval was needed before gaming could be conducted there.

Tribal officials expect to open the \$120 million Twin Arrows Casino next spring. Plans call for a hotel, conference center, spa and golf course at the site.

“It will be the flagship of the Navajo casinos,” said gaming attorney Ray Etcitty.

The Navajo Nation operates two casinos, and a third is in the works in New Mexico.

Tribal officials want to annex the land east of Flagstaff into the nearest tribal community of Leupp, which approved gaming within its boundaries in 2008 and later OK'd alcohol sales at the planned casino.

Casinos are legal on the reservation but individual tribal communities still have discretion in allowing them in their backyards. The consumption and sale of alcohol generally is prohibited on

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the reservation but casinos are an exception, as long as the local community wants it.

Thomas Walker, who represents the Leupp area on the Tribal Council, said the casino will boost the economy of the surrounding communities and could lead to other developments, such as housing for casino employees and emergency services.

“I think those are down the road, and that’s pretty exciting that can happen as well,” he said.

In his announcement, Echo Hawk said the project represents an important economic development for the Navajo Nation that will generate jobs in a time of need.

Tribal gaming officials originally chose another site in the general area but determined that it would take too long to gain the easements needed to reach the site from the interstate.

The Interior Department allowed the tribe to acquire the current site through laws passed by Congress that relate to a decades-long land dispute between the Navajo and Hopi tribes. In exchange for land the Navajo Nation lost, the tribe could select lands that were near the existing reservation for purchase.

Payments for the casino’s business site lease will go to a trust fund meant to benefit those who were relocated, Etcitty said.

The Forgotten People, a group that includes residents tangled up in the land dispute, has questioned to what extent the group would benefit. The group’s attorney, Jim Zion, said it intends to enforce the trust.

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