

BUSINESS

O'odham to build largest AZ casino-resort near Glendale

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PHOENIX — The Tohono O'odham Nation plans to build the state's largest casino-resort on unincorporated land close to the University of Phoenix Stadium in Glendale.

The 1.2 million-square-foot complex is expected to cost about \$550 million, tribal Chairman Ned Norris Jr. announced to a handful of people in Phoenix Thursday afternoon, following two days of meetings with state, county and city officials.

The hotel — with 600 rooms overlooking a 3-acre enclosed atrium — will have 120 luxury suites, eight restaurants and dozens of shops, Norris said. Its working name is West Valley Resort at Northern Avenue.

"Obviously, we're really excited about this," Norris said.

The proposed site is at West Northern Avenue and North 91st Avenue about a mile north of the stadium, home of the Arizona Cardinals, and Jobing.com Arena, home of the Phoenix Coyotes. Retirement community Sun City is about two miles to the northwest.

At least 6,000 construction workers will be needed to complete the project, Norris said. When complete — by 2012 if all goes smoothly — the tribal nation plans to hire about 3,000 workers.

Economic development consultants estimate the new casino would generate about \$300 million for the state of Arizona annually.

Before the tribe can break ground on its new project, the land must be placed in trust by the federal government, becoming legally part of the Tohono O'odham Reservation. That is likely to happen, Norris said, due to a series of events dating back to 1960.

That year, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed the Painted Rock Dam on the Gila River. Chronic flooding in the 1970s and '80s ruined 9,880 acres of land in the San Lucy District, including a 750-acre farm that provided tribal revenue. Members were forced to move to a 40-acre parcel of land outside Gila Bend.

In 1982, Congress directed the secretary of the Interior Department to find replacement land within a 100-mile radius, but none was identified.

Then-Sens. Barry Goldwater and Dennis DeConcini along with then-Reps. John McCain and Mo Udall sponsored legislation that became the Gila Bend Indian Reservation Lands Replacement Act. The act was signed into law in 1986.

It authorizes the tribal nation to buy up to 9,880 acres of private lands in Pima, Pinal or Maricopa counties.

The law also requires the Interior secretary to take the replacement land into trust and that the land "shall be deemed to be a Federal Indian Reservation."

Hence, the new casino would be on reservation land.

Asked if he was optimistic about securing financing on such a large project during a recession, Norris smiled.

"You have to be. What else is there to be?" he said. "We don't expect any problems with our proven track record."

Scott Sirois, CEO of the Tohono O'odham Gaming Enterprise, said the bleak economy does have its upsides.

"The bad news is also the good news," he said. "Construction costs are the lowest ... in years, if not decades."

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