

THE DEMING HEADLIGHT

[Akela Casino plans moving forward](#)

Posted: 04/05/2012 02:58:48 PM MDT



Nearly five years after casino efforts began, the Fort Sill Apache tribe is rounding the stretch in efforts to begin gaming at Akela, NM.

As part of a two-stage determination process to begin gaming, tribal officials met with interested residents and government officials during a technical scoping town hall meeting held Wednesday evening in Deming. The town hall is the second meeting held in Deming, which is about 25

miles west of the tribal land in Akela. The first was held in Dec. 2011.

Fort Sill Apache Chairman Jeff Haozous says this is the most progress the tribe has made in its efforts to begin gaming, but with setbacks, such as Gov. Bill Richardson's police blockade of the site in 2008, he has learned not to count his chickens before they hatch.

"This meeting is a step, a pretty big step, but there are other things that need to happen," he said during an interview held before the meeting. "From a realistic perspective, it takes awhile to get things done and to get things approved."

The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act requires the tribe comply with the act and the National Environmental Policy Act. After those steps are completed, the Bureau of Indian Affairs will review the project to see if it is in the best interests of the tribe and the community.

Haozous said the work to comply with the NEPA prompted the town hall. He added that the tribe expects to have the environmental work completed at the end of this summer with its application turned into the BIA in the fall.

Following the BIA's consideration of the tribe's application, approval will be sought from the Secretary of the Interior and from the governor's office to indicate the project is in the best interests of the tribe, region and state.

"I think our illustrious government owes the Apache nation something for breaking their promises and the way they (Apaches) were treated," Maurice Crawford, of Deming, said, noting he and his wife, Judy, had recently visited the prison in St. Augustine, Fl., in which the tribe was once held after relocation from the west.

Per the requirements of the scoping meeting, experts on water use and traffic helped project the impact of the casino, if built. Hydrologist Cindy Ardito, of Albuquerque-based INTERA, said the casino is projected to need about 10 gallons of water per minute, or the equivalent use of a 13-acre irrigated farm. She added that impacts to surrounding wells are not expected.

The traffic analysis projected little-to-no impacts on traffic on Interstate 10 and the surrounding roads.

Those considerations, along with projected impacts on noise, air quality and the economy will be considered as part of the NEPA compliance process.

Gary Meyers, operations manager for the tribe's current facility, which serves as a restaurant and smoke shop, said annual economic impact, if the casino is approved, would amount to about \$45.3 million annually to Luna County and surrounding counties. He also pointed to Luna County's unemployment rate, which frequently tops the state with figures at and above 20 percent, receiving a helping hand with 245 direct and 56 indirect jobs resulting from the casino's operation. The impact from those jobs, he said, would amount to about \$12.5 million in salaries and benefits.

"We need the jobs and that casino would bring a lot of them," Deming resident Betty Lynch said.

According to the tribe, following approval of the application, building and operations can move forward with a Class III casino at the site. That classification allows for more gaming at the site than Bingo, such as slot machines, blackjack and roulette.

In April 2009, the tribe held paper Bingo games at the facility until August, when it received a violation notice from the National Indian Gaming Commission. An appeal to the National Indian Gaming Commission is pending.

Upon approval, tribal officials say they can begin building within the first 60 days. The plan is to erect a 30,000 square-foot facility to house the gaming.

A transcript of the meeting will be available after about three weeks and will be hosted on the tribe's website, www.fortsillapache-nsn.gov.

Matt Robinson can be reached at mrobinson@demingheadlight.com