

THE DEMING HEADLIGHT

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By Matt Robinson, Headlight Staff



We have taken a measured and cautious approach toward our Tribe's return... (Headlight File Photo)

Whether or not the Fort Sill Apache Tribe originally agreed to not open casino gaming at Akela is unclear following Governor Susana Martinez' statement that she does not support the casino because it was not originally included in the tribe's plan.

On Tuesday, after an economic development speech in Deming, Gov. Martinez said the tribe had agreed not to open gaming at its site at Akela, which has been designated as tribal lands east of Deming. On Wednesday, Jeff Haozous, tribal chairman, declined to specify if the tribe had indeed made that agreement.

"I wouldn't feel comfortable addressing it until we have a chance to talk to her," he said of Gov. Martinez. "We've requested a meeting with her."

The tribe also released a statement alluding to, in short, that it does not want to step on any toes by clarifying the position.

"We have taken a measured and cautious approach toward our Tribe's return to New Mexico and to this project," the statement detailed. "Over the course of the years, we have addressed a wide variety of misconceptions regarding our history in, and commitments to, the state of New Mexico.

That misconceptions and misinformation still exist makes it clear that we still have work to do."

It continued by saying the tribe had an "unnecessarily confrontational and litigious" relationship with the previous administration of Gov. Bill Richardson, who was not named in the statement. He had used New Mexico State Police to blockade the site in 2008.

"We have sought a cooperative and transparent relationship with the current administration and believe that after meeting with us and reviewing all of the facts surrounding our return to the state of New

Mexico and agreements between the Tribe and the federal government, the governor will be just as supportive as the rest of the community," the release added.

It says that the tribe began its efforts by talking to community members near Akela, which is part of Luna County. They say they have consulted with local city and county officials as well as members of the state's legislature, other New Mexico tribes, Pueblos and federal officials.

"We have been encouraged by the extremely strong support of both our return to our homeland and for our proposed project," it said.

Chairman Haozous calls the project an economic engine that will enable the tribe to return to its home in New Mexico after being gone for more than 125 years.

The tribe has touted that the project will create 245 direct and 56 indirect jobs with a \$45.3 million economic impact to Luna County and surrounding counties. Additionally, the tribe says projected salaries and benefits, if gaming opens, would amount to about \$12.5 million.

If federal and state approval is granted, the tribe says it can begin construction on the 30,000 square-foot facility within the first 60 days. Chairman Haozous has said he expects the tribe to turn in its application to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the fall after environmental impact work is completed at the end of this summer.

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