

THE DEMING HEADLIGHT

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By Matt Robinson, Headlight Staff



If Wednesday evening's town hall with leaders from the Fort Sill Apache Tribe provided an accurate sampling of public support for casino plans at Akela, NM, the tribe should have no issues with public opinion.

Of the roughly 200 in attendance, only one local businessman stepped forward to speak against the project, saying he had seen the social and economic problems a casino could present for a county during time living in the Pacific Northwest.

"I've seen communities, worked in them, where casino jobs were the only jobs," Steve Fox said, arguing that casinos are allowed to play by unfair rules not afforded to other businesses. "Our family has been here since the thirties. I have a business; I don't want my business impacted by an unfair playing field."

But Fox stood alone in his outright opposition to the tribe's plans to develop 30 acres of land located off Interstate 10 between Deming and Las Cruces. Other locals went on the offensive with questions aimed at exposing flaws in the tribe's plans. Ann Shine-Ring, a 10 year resident of Akela, said the survey used by the tribe to support economic development claims is "skewed" and did not include input from Akela residents. She also expressed environmental concerns.

"Where the hell are you going to get water from one aquifer," she asked. "I know people need jobs, but please consider the environmental impact."

Later in the meeting, local Duke Maxwell shot back: "People complain about the water; it's the white man who wasted it. Don't cry over the water they're (tribal members) the ones that should be crying."

Other locals asked the tribe about a business plan, what it will do to help those with gambling problems and if it plans to contribute to local charities. Tribal liaison Joel Davis said state law requires casinos to put funding toward helping those with gambling addiction.

"It is our philosophy to be a good neighbor," Jeff Haozous, formerly Houser, tribal chairman, said in response to concerns over light pollution. "We contribute to charities as a matter of course."

Overall, though, the crowd came out overwhelmingly in favor of the casino, which still needs state and federal approval. The tribe has made progress, considering it has been able to meet with staff from Gov. Susana Martinez' office. Haozous has said former Gov. Bill Richardson who sent state police to blockade efforts to open gaming in 2008 and his staff never met with the tribe. However, Gov. Martinez has gone on the record in opposition to the tribe's petition for a casino.

"In New Mexico, we have casinos up the kazoo... and I think we need one here," local William Martinez said, followed by a round of applause from the standing-room-only audience.

"They say gambling brings drugs and trash," Nancy Johnson, a local historian said. "Well, honey, we have drugs and trash here."

She took the basic approach of the old proverb "To each his own," using the example that those who do not drink alcohol should avoid bars.

The town hall was scantily attended by local government officials. In attendance were Luna County Commissioner Joe "Oleo" Milo, Jr., city Councilors Joe "Butter" Milo and Linda Enis, city administrator Richard McInturff and Luna County Sheriff Raymond Cobos. Congressional representatives from the offices of Rep. Steve Pearce, Sen. Tom Udall and Sen. Jeff Bingaman were also in attendance. The crowd broke out into boos and jeers when Sen. Bingaman's name was announced, a clear show of disapproval for his recent letter to the Secretary of the Interior in which he strongly opposed the tribe's plans for a casino.

"I'm really moved," Haozous said of the strong public support following the meeting. "It's really touching."