

HO-CHUNK NATION STILL EXPECTING FEDERAL CASINO ACTION SOON

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Price

BELOIT - A Ho-Chunk Nation representative said Thursday while there's no definitive date for federal action on the tribe's Beloit casino-resort development proposal, it's likely to come soon.

Meanwhile, the tribe is working on various fronts to be ready if and when approval comes.

Ho-Chunk Public Information Officer Collin Price said in an interview with the *Beloit Daily News* the tribe is still confident a decision will be made by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in the near future, setting in motion the final steps ahead of construction. A final environmental impact statement must be published, a document needed before land can be transferred into public trust for the project, and before BIA at the Department of the Interior supports or denies the proposal. If approved, the plan would go to Gov. Tony Evers, who as a candidate told the newspaper he would support the development. Since then, Evers' administration has been less definitive in statements regarding the plan. In a state report obtained by the *Beloit Daily News* on Feb. 8, the Department of Administration's Division of Gaming estimated the project "is four years from approval."

"We want to be ready for when that ruling comes, and we want to be prepared as we can be instead of losing time after we get that approval," Price said. "We aren't sure yet, and we have to be careful to respect the bureau's internal timelines. In the meantime, we are doing what we can in terms of planning."

That preparation involves an effort by the tribe to work with local stakeholders in fostering future workforce development opportunities to accommodate for the large development, with figures estimating around 1,500 jobs could be created. Price said the tribe will look to work closely with area educational partners, like Blackhawk Technical College, in developing expanded construction and hospitality programming for high school, college and non-traditional students, and adults who may be considering a career change. Price stressed all programming development is "all preliminary."

"This is really about joining forces and make sure we consider all the challenges that come along with this," Price added. "We can't do this alone."

In anticipation of a federal ruling the tribe recently hired Hill International, a Philadelphia-based construction risk management firm, to assist with pre-construction and design activities for the proposed development along Interstate 39/90 and Willowbrook Road. The site is across the interstate from the Beloit Travel Wisconsin Welcome Center on a 75-acre parcel Price calls an entertainment district.

The tribe worked with Hill International on three recently completed gaming expansion projects across Wisconsin, according to Ho-Chunk Nation Executive Director of Business David Greendeer.

"Each project generated significant economic impact for the Ho-Chunk Nation, and each was delivered as planned," Greendeer said. "Given Hill's track record on the Black River Falls project specifically, where they helped realize an early completion for us, we felt it was the smart choice to bring them back on-board for our new Beloit project."

Price said an internal feasibility study for the project will wrap up in the next six to eight weeks, adding that the study would provide detailed specifics for the project's scope, along with updated designs and renderings.

The development could include a hotel, convention center, water park and nearby commercial properties, and Price said the tribe was in discussions with multiple developers, major hotel operators and major brands that have made inquiries about joining the project. He declined to name specific entities due to the formative nature of the talks.