

Madera Co. supervisors reject Chukchansi request, goal is to reopen casino/hotel

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When Chukchansi tribal council members recently asked the Madera County Board of Supervisors to sign off on a settlement agreement that will help the tribe reopen Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino, the supervisors refused.

Board Chairman David Rogers, in a letter sent to the tribe's lawyers, said the board was unwilling to sign an agreement until the issue of tribal governance has been resolved. Questions over tribal leadership and missing audits led to conflict that sparked the closure of the hotel and casino near Coarsegold in October by the state and federal governments.

"No nontribal entity, whether it be federal, state or local, can authoritatively determine who the governing body of the Chukchansi tribe is," the county letter said. "Only the tribe can do that. Until such time the tribe itself agrees on which council or other group constitutes its legal governing body, Madera County will not attempt to do so."

The tribe also is in the process of negotiating settlement agreements with federal and state agencies. Such agreements must be in place before the hotel and casino can reopen.

The settlement agreement that the county rejected would have established police and fire services with monthly payments by the tribe of \$112,000, a \$1 million annual grant to nonprofits, a \$350,000 payment upon lifting of the court federal court order to open the casino and monthly payments to pay off remaining debt to the county at 4% interest.

Supervisor Tom Wheeler said the tribe owes the county about \$480,000 so far.

The council that supervisors deal with should be elected by the whole tribe and not be an interim council, he said.

Supervisors were concerned about a letter in February that named the 2010 council as the tribe's leadership on an interim basis, Wheeler said during a break in the board meeting.

The February letter said the Interior Board of Indian Appeals' decision "shall not be construed, in any respect, as a determination on the ability of the 2010 council to execute the tribe's obligations."

Reggie Lewis, tribal council chairman, said the council that was elected in 2010 has been recognized by the federal government — the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Interior Board of Indian Appeals and the National Indian Gaming Commission — as the legal tribal leadership.

The county's letter "was a surprise to us," Lewis told supervisors Tuesday.

He said the letter came to the tribe's attention during the tribal council meeting last Thursday.

If the county is unwilling to sign the settlement agreement, he said, the tribe could seek law enforcement services from the state since the California Highway Patrol has an office in Oakhurst. He also said the tribe could create its own police force and court system.

He said the tribe is getting closer to an agreement with the federal government and is continuing to meet with the state.

Lewis said the council is about a month from reaching a final agreement. It will take about four months from that point for the casino and hotel to reopen. The hotel and casino employed more than 1,000 people before it closed.

Casino employee Tina Jones said three members of her household are without work since the October closure. All have run out of unemployment benefits.

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