

# New deal with Madera County brings Chukchansi hotel-casino closer to reopening

By Marc Benjamin  
mbenjamin@fresnobee.com

Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino, closed almost 14 months, is a step closer to reopening – potentially as soon as three or four weeks – after the tribe and Madera County supervisors approved a change in their agreement to improve public safety.

But county supervisors were still asking for more during a special meeting Wednesday.

Supervisors approved additions to the county's existing contract but will continue to negotiate on other issues, including paying for additional firefighters, improved roads and other items.

The tribal council approved the agreement on Tuesday. It is an addition to the county's 2007 contract with the tribe.

The tribe agreed to make payments to the county neglected over the past two years, hire a full-time deputy with office space at the casino, and pay for a ladder truck that allows firefighters to reach the tallest parts of the 11-story hotel.

1,000

The number of employees that will return to Chukchansi Gold

The agreement will cost the tribe millions of dollars but will let the Coarsegold-area resort reopen within weeks if the agreement is supported by the state attorney general and the National Indian Gaming Commission. State and federal agencies also are in the process of reaching agreements with the tribe aimed at improving public safety and related to financial records from previous audits of the casino.

The state and federal governments shut down the casino in October 2014 after a raid of the gaming office by one tribal faction turned physical and led to 15 arrests. If the casino reopens, more than 1,000 employees can return to work and the economic picture for eastern Madera County will brighten significantly.

If state and federal government agencies agree on terms for reopening, no federal court hearing will be required to undo the injunction that closed the casino. If there is a disagreement between state and federal gaming officials, a hearing will be necessary in U.S. District Court in Fresno.

## Reopening soon

Christian Goode, chief operating officer for the hotel and casino, said gaming officials are targeting a reopening date between Dec. 20 and 31.

About 1,000 employees will get called back to work, many who previously worked in the facility, he said.

We think we are in a position to hire the necessary staff in a very short time frame.

Christian Goode, chief operating officer, Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino

"We think we are in a position to hire the necessary staff in a very short time frame," Goode said.

He said all gaming and nearly all food operations will be available when patrons return. The casino will have 1,750

gaming machines in operation. One food venue undergoing a conversion will not open until a later date, he said.

It will be important to get the casino open over Christmas break because it's a busy time and people are looking for things to do, he said.

"People are out and about. They want to enjoy themselves and have some entertainment," Goode said. "It's critical that we get open to entertain people during that period."

## **More public safety**

The tribe owes Madera County more than \$1.2 million in monthly payments, along with \$1 million in annual payments that haven't been made in the past two years, the new agreement says. Under the law enforcement agreement, the county wants the tribe to pay for one Madera County deputy sheriff 24 hours a day for up to six months after the resort reopens. The cost is expected to be \$318,518 at most, according to the agreement.

The Sheriff's Office will have office space at the facility and communications equipment will be provided by the tribe that will cost about \$37,782, the agreement said.

The county also wants the tribe to provide a firefighting "aerial apparatus," a large ladder truck, because of the height of the hotel. The expected cost is about \$1 million.

\$1 million

Projected cost for a ladder truck for fire services

The county also wants funding from the tribe to staff the ladder truck after it's bought next year. The fire station is about a mile from the casino on Road 417.

Supervisor Tom Wheeler, who represents the Coarsegold area, said the hotel tower was not completed when the county negotiated the original agreement with the tribe in 2007.

The tribe promised to negotiate for additional firefighters with the county. The tribe's lawyer, John Peebles, said he will send a letter to the county to outline the timing for negotiations.

Madera County Counsel Regina Garza said extra staffing will be required for the ladder truck to meet state guidelines. The truck will need three firefighters around the clock, about \$1 million annually, Wheeler said. The station is now staffed by two firefighters around the clock.

## **Tribe has no money**

The tribe was hesitant to immediately fund firefighters. "We don't have a lot of money; our tribe is doing without," Morris Reid, a tribal council member, told supervisors. "What you're asking is extra cost. ... It's like killing the golden goose before it gets going to lay eggs."

But money won't be needed right away, because the ladder truck hasn't been purchased and likely will not be ready for about a year, county officials say.

Following the meeting, Madera County Board of Supervisors Chairman David Rogers said he understands the tribe's financial concerns.

"Today, they have no money," he said. "Once the casino opens and the money starts rolling in, they will forget the pain of a few dollars in the name of public safety."

What you're asking is extra cost. ... It's like killing the golden goose before it gets going to lay eggs.

Morris Reid, Chukchansi tribal council member

Garza said the county also will continue to seek the tribe's financing for issues that weren't agreed to originally.

In September, the draft agreement sought a \$1 million annual contribution for roads and transportation and a \$250,000 annual payment to the county for its community and economic development department, which oversees housing and job programs for the county. Those were not included in the agreement approved Wednesday, nor was a \$25,000 annual contribution for alcohol education and treatment, and problem gambling and gambling disorders.

But, Wheeler said, approval of the agreement on Wednesday was a positive development.

"I really think it's going in the right direction," he said. "We didn't get all we wanted and they didn't get all they wanted, but we have to get the place open so everyone begins to benefit."

Marc Benjamin: [559-441-6166](tel:559-441-6166), [@beebenjamin](https://www.instagram.com/beebenjamin)