

Wilton tribe seeks land for casino near Highway 99

By Peter Hecht
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A south Sacramento County tribe is seeking to acquire 282 acres to build a lavish casino and hotel resort along state Highway 99 near Galt.

The Wilton Rancheria's ambitions to build a major gambling destination – potentially on scale with the Thunder Valley Casino Resort near Lincoln – were revealed in documents submitted to the Bureau of Indian Affairs for an environmental review for the project.

In a Dec. 28 public notice, the more than 700-member tribe in Wilton announced that it is petitioning for an environmental review to take land into trust for the project. The tribe's proposed Twin Cities Casino Resort would be in the city of Galt sphere of influence near Highway 99 north of Twin Cities Road.

Tribal Chairman Raymond C. Hitchcock said in an interview Tuesday that the project will take many years to reach fruition and requires approval of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and multiple agencies. In addition, the tribe needs to reach an agreement on a gambling compact with Gov. Jerry Brown or a future governor as well as memorandums of understanding with Sacramento County, the city of Galt and potentially other communities.

"We're still working on getting land into trust. And once we get close to that goal, we can start negotiating with the governor for a compact," Hitchcock said.

Hitchcock said the tribe's preferred development option calls for building a gambling resort featuring a casino with 2,000 slot machines and 84 table games. That plan would also include a 12-story, 302-room hotel.

With a prime freeway location, the project stands to be a major gambling lure and leading player in the regional casino market.

Currently, Sacramento's largest gambling development – the Thunder Valley Casino Resort off Highway 65 near Lincoln – features 2,800 slot machines, 105 table games and a 17-story hotel with 297 rooms.

The Sacramento region is also home to the Cache Creek Casino Resort near Brooks in Yolo County, featuring a 200-room hotel, 2,400 slot machines and 122 table games. In El Dorado County, the Red Hawk Casino near Highway 50 has 2,100 slots and 82 table games.

Elsewhere, two other tribal groups are pushing casino development plans for Amador County.

Under its environmental review request with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Wilton Rancheria proposed six development options, including the casino resort near Galt as well as a shopping center alternative if the gambling development isn't approved.

The tribe also proposed an alternative, smaller-scale casino near Elk Grove on property north of Green Road and east of the Cosumnes River that is near the tribe's historic rancheria location.

The latter site is neither preferred by the tribe nor local government agencies. In 2009, concerns over development in the area led Sacramento County and the city of Elk Grove to file legal challenges to the Wilton Rancheria's successful restoration of its tribal status.

At the time, the county and city charged that the federal government improperly agreed to let the tribe take land into

trust near the Wilton Rancheria.

The tribe and its development partner, Boyd Gaming, later sought an alternative casino site, a 160-acre cow pasture near Arno Road and 99. Boyd Gaming operates 22 casinos in eight states, including The Orleans and Sam's Town resorts in Las Vegas.

The public is invited to participate in a 45-day comment period, beginning this week, on the tribe's application to take land into trust.

A public hearing on the project will be held Jan. 29 at 6 p.m. at the Chabolla Community Center in Galt.

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