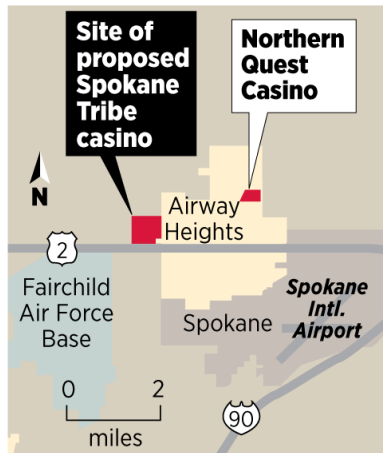


# Interior Department gives OK to Spokanes' casino project

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The Spokane Tribe has won approval from a key government agency in its drive to build a casino, hotel and stores near Airway Heights.

The U.S. Department of the Interior sent Gov. Jay Inslee a letter saying it believes the project "is in the best interests of the Spokane Tribe and its members and not detrimental to the surrounding community."

Under federal law, those are the criteria for approving a gaming project on tribal land. The project would create jobs and increase tribal public service programs on the Spokane Reservation, Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Kevin Washburn wrote in a four-page letter explaining the decision.

"After all our efforts, it's incredibly gratifying to receive the Interior Department's approval," Spokane Tribal Council Chairman Rudy Peone said in a press release. "We want to create jobs and economic opportunity for our tribe and the entire community."

A spokesman for Inslee confirmed the governor received notice from the agency on the project, but wouldn't comment on what it said until the office had a chance to study it.

Inslee must agree with the decision as the final step for the tribe to move forward with the casino. Spokesman David Postman said he didn't know how long that decision would take.

But four Democratic legislators from Western Washington released a letter Monday evening saying they were "outraged" the federal government gave the tribe the greenlight on the casino.

"The implications of this decision are deeply troubling for our region and our state and we are calling on Governor Inslee to deny the Spokane Tribe's application," wrote Reps. Christopher Hurst, Brian Blake, and Dean Takko, and Sen. Brian Hatfield. It could "open the floodgates to gaming in every community in our state, whether the local community wants it or not."

Local critics argue the casino would be built too close to Fairchild Air Force Base, a dominant economic engine for the Inland Northwest, causing it to fall victim to closure at some future date.

But base officials did not raise those concerns in the Environmental Impact Statement prepared for the statement, and Washburn said in his letter that high-ranking Air Force official wrote in February promising "to work collaboratively with the Spokane Tribe as the project moves forward."

The casino would be the second on the West Plains near Airway Heights. The Kalispel Tribe operates Northern Quest Casino and has opposed the Spokanes' proposal. Washburn acknowledged that, but said the Spokanes' project would be on their traditional homeland, while the Kalispel's casino is not on their traditional land.

The land is off the Spokane's reservation, but the tribe owns it. It's a traditional encampment area where the tribe was camped more than 100 years ago at the start of battles between the U.S. cavalry and some native tribes.

Carol Evans, vice chairwoman of the tribal council, noted that history in the press release: "Now, we have the opportunity to write a new chapter in our shared history on the same acres of land. Where once we fought, now we can join together to build better lives for both our peoples."

"We note it would be deeply ironic to allow the Kalispel Tribe the opportunity to develop a casino within the Spokane Tribe's aboriginal area, while denying the Spokane Tribe the opportunity," he wrote.

He said the best solution would be a negotiation between the tribes to develop a model that benefits both, rather than "to spend millions of dollars on lobbyists and lawyers to fight rather than to cooperate." But that negotiation won't happen without the department's approval of the Spokanes' proposal, Washburn wrote.

The Spokane Tribe first proposed the project in 2006. The final environmental impact statement was completed two years ago.