

Cherokee Scout

Tribe buying land for casino

Class II gaming facility will be built in Marble By DWIGHT OTWELL

dotwell@cherokeescout.com Tuesday, May 11, 2010 8:05 PM CDT **Marble** – A Class II gaming facility could be operating on tribal land in Cherokee County in 2011.

Michell Hicks, principal chief of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, signed a resolution on May 5 that was approved by the tribal council on May 4. The resolution authorizes a joint Class II committee to access the necessary financing to fund land acquisitions and purchase almost 800 acres in Cherokee County to prepare for possible Class II or other tribally approved projects in the area.

Hicks said Friday that a Class II facility in Cherokee County would include gaming machines and “possibly bingo.” The casino on the Qualla Boundary is a Class III gaming facility and has blackjack, slot machines and all other types of gaming that are not included in Class I or Class II.

“We need to secure the land and continue planning, including market and financial feasibility,” Hicks said.

The Class II Gaming Committee studied and recommended which lands the tribe should purchase for the Cherokee County facility, he said. The 793.58 acres to be purchased at a cost of \$6,414,828 is both trust (tribal) and non-trust (non-tribal) land. Hicks confirmed that the property is in the area of the old Mundys Lumber & Veneer plant on Tomotla Road. The committee evaluated about a half-dozen sites in the county. The overall scope or size of the project isn’t yet known.

“There is still a great deal of work to do, but I anticipate we will move forward in 2010,” Hicks said.

It will take a minimum of 12 months to build the facility, and it could take up to 15-18 months, he said.

“It will definitely [result in] a few hundred jobs,” he said.

The land to be purchased is the following:

- Tract 32 – 247 acres at \$700,000;
- Tract 35 – 205 acres at \$500,000;
- Stiles Colvard Creek Gorge – 26.64 acres at \$386,200;
- Stiles Old Home Place – 4.94 acres at \$100,000;
- BB&T foreclosure – 144 acres at \$700,000;
- Stiles U.S. 19 frontage west tract – 115 acres at \$2.3 million;

- Mount Holdings plant site on highway – 51 acres at \$1,450,000.

A commission of \$278,628 would bring the total to \$6,414,908. The resolution states that other future opportunities available to the tribe, in addition to job opportunities and housing that could compliment a successful Class II operation on the proposed site includes, but is not limited to, the following concepts or ideas:

- cultural heritage center and historical museum;
- veterans memorial;
- nature conservancy;
- outdoor gardens and nature trail;
- creek walk and waterfall tour;
- tubing;
- trout fishing, hiking;
- rock climbing, mountain biking, horseback riding;
- Great Smoky Mountain Railway and/or airport fly-in gaming excursions;
- tourist visitations;
- future residential golf course development.

County Manager David Badger, who also is director of the county's Economic Development Commission, said a gaming facility would bring new jobs to the county. Construction workers would eat and lodge here.

"Hopefully, it will spur further growth and induce confidence in investing in our community," he said.

Badger noted that anything built on tribal land won't be subject to property or sales tax, but he thinks it will have a positive impact on the economy and bring jobs to the county.

Murphy Mayor Bill Hughes said a water line from Murphy to Andrews already is in place. A gaming facility would require sewer lines.

Hughes believes sewer lines go as far as the National Guard Armory on U.S. 19/74. It probably would be about 2.5 miles to extend lines to the future gaming facility.

Hughes said he hopes a gaming complex would filter people back into Murphy to shop, eat at restaurants and stay the night.

"It will bring in extra jobs and probably building [around tribal lands]," he said.