

Welcome Returns

by

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To hear the supporters of the Ho-Chunk Nation's plan for an enormous new gaming complex tell it, none of them likes to gamble. Perhaps that's why they're so enthusiastic about this opportunity for economic development in the Chicago Southland: It has all of the earmarks of a "sure thing." As one its most ardent supporters, U.S. Representative Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-2nd), explained, "My first choice for economic development is not gaming. Nevertheless, the economic benefits of gaming are indisputable...when completed this will be the biggest gaming and entertainment complex in Illinois. It will create up to 5,000 jobs, with an average annual salary of \$45,000. The various facilities will pay an estimated \$78 million in payroll taxes each year, and even more than that in revenue sharing payments to the State and local communities."

A Southland boon born in northwestern suburbs.

On May 3rd, Jackson hosted the official announcement of the Ho-Chunk's proposal to build a 432-acre family entertainment destination at the intersection of Torrence Avenue and Glenwood Dyer Road in Lynwood. But according to William Bowlware Jr., legislative council for the Ho-Chunk Nation, the seed for this project was actually planted two and a half years earlier when a resident of Hoffman Estates contacted the Nation regarding opening a casino in Illinois. The query was prompted by the discovery of an early document indicating that the tribe had once lived in the northwestern suburbs. According to federal law, Native American tribes with an historical connection to any state where gaming is allowed, can own and operate a casino in that state.

Apparently, a group in Hoffman Estates was interested in fostering economic development by expanding the entertainment venues of the area. Several local leaders viewed the Ho-Chunks as a way to bring gaming to the northwest without having to compete for the last of the Illinois casino licenses. By spring 2003 tribal leaders were talking with Representative Phil Crane (R-8th) of Palatine and other local politicians about the potential of a Ho-Chunk owned and operated casino. They also engaged Washington DC public relations firm, Ernst & Young to increase the tribe's visibility with Congress and the White House. The tribe planned to use this enhanced access to policy makers to address getting a tribal trust in Illinois as well as ongoing education and health care concerns.

The project moves south.

As the hot summer months passed it was clear that the interest in a Hoffman Estates casino had definitely cooled on both sides. The Ho-Chunks and the area's political and business interests just couldn't seem to come to an understanding. By the time the tribe's option on a northwestern site had expired in August, they were already looking elsewhere. In the course of seeking support for the Hoffman Estates project, the tribe had developed a number of useful contacts in Washington and Springfield. These included the President of the Illinois Senate, Emil Jones (D-Chicago) and U.S. Representative Jesse Jackson Jr. Although Jones was working hard to secure the last Illinois gaming license for Country Club Hills, he was clearly impressed by the Ho-Chunk proposal. So was Jackson. Both men offered their support to the tribe on the condition that they locate their casino in the Southland.

Encouraged by this response, the Ho-Chunks agreed to look south and started developing a strategy to push the project forward as quickly as possible. Their plan called for a two-pronged effort to get the site of the proposed casino placed in a tribal trust. They would go through the usual channel of applying to the Department of Interior. But in addition, they would ask Representative Jackson to sponsor congressional legislation to the same end. While such legislation is rare, when successful it's considerably faster than dealing with the Department of the Interior.

There was just one hitch: Jackson was uneasy about giving his support to a gaming complex. According to his Chief of Staff, Rick Bryant, the Congressman decided to give the Ho-Chunks the green light only if they agreed to two conditions. The first condition was that they offer the state a generous revenue-sharing plan. In fact, only the Governor of the state has the power to negotiate a compact with the tribe. But the Ho-Chunks wanted to show Jackson that they were operating in good faith. So they told him that they would be willing to share up to 25% of their revenue with the state. Jackson's hope was that the Governor would agree to take 15% off the top and allow the remaining 10% to be used in support of the public schools and municipalities of the Southland.

A casino becomes an entertainment destination.

Jackson's second demand was that the Ho-Chunk Nation expand the scope of their project from a land-based casino to a "destination point that offered plenty of family-oriented recreational and cultural activities." The Ho-Chunks not only agreed to this idea – they enthusiastically embraced it! The luxurious gaming facility originally proposed, would now be part of an innovative family entertainment center. The amenities would include an 800-room hotel, several restaurants, an amphitheater, movie theater, softball and soccer fields, walking and jogging trails, an indoor/outdoor water park, a night-club, corporate meeting facilities and retail space. It would also provide Pow Wow Grounds, offering local and visiting tribes a private and uniquely appropriate place to hold ceremonial rites in observance of their heritage.

An exhibit of the past leads the way to brighter future.

The very first addition proposed to the "destination" concept was a Native American heritage and history museum. Bryant recalled that the idea grew out of the fact that one of the sites under consideration was the historically significant Sauk area. The inclusion of museum in the complex was not only appealing but surprisingly timely. One of Chicago's best-known educational exhibits on Native American culture at the Field Museum – a life-size replica of a Pawnee lodge– was scheduled to be closed for renovations. The lodge has helped millions of visitors including Illinois school children to understand and appreciate the ingenuity and complex richness of Native American life. The exhibit's closing, though temporary, made it that much more obvious that there is a limited opportunity in Chicagoland to learn about Native Americans. Clearly, an institution devoted to exhibits of Native American life and lore would be an important enhancement to the cultural amenities of Chicago.

Support on both sides of the aisle.

As the Ho-Chunks expanded their plans for the site, they sought to increase the project's support base. Roland Burris, former state Comptroller, had worked with the Ho-Chunk Nation on several projects in the past and was particularly respected and trusted by the Tribe's leaders. They asked Burris's advice on how to gauge the reaction to their proposal among area business leaders in both political parties. Burris, a Democrat, suggested they talk to Manny Hoffman, a Republican and past CEO of the Southland Chamber of Commerce. So one fall evening in 2003, Boulware met Burris, Burris' partner, Fred LeBed and Manny Hoffman for dinner at a Homewood restaurant. It was soon clear from the congenial tone of the meeting that the project could anticipate a warm reception from conservative business interests as well as liberal politicians.

Following the Homewood dinner, Boulware and Dall consulted with Kevin McNulty, current CEO of the Chicago Southland Chamber of Commerce. McNulty, like his predecessor Hoffman, immediately recognized the tremendous potential of this project. Viewing the Southland as “the final frontier of Chicago Business,” McNulty understood that an entertainment center would not only generate new jobs, but an enormous amount of interest in the area from a wide variety of industries. After providing the Ho-Chunks with some helpful data and geographical information, McNulty suggested they also meet with Jim Bush, Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce Board, for some ideas about possible sites.

It was Bush who directed them to the Lynwood site that was finally chosen. He knew it well because four years earlier, he had persuaded the state to invest \$900,000 on infrastructure to develop it. At the time Bush was advocating the creation of a soccer field on this space in hopes of bringing athletes and fans to the area. Unfortunately, soccer wasn't quite the draw everyone had hoped it would be. But since sewer and electric lines were already in place, Bush felt that the site was a “natural” for the Ho-Chunk entertainment complex. Plus, the site was free of any environmental contamination and, because it was located between two major highways, offered excellent access to transportation.

Ho-Chunks foster business growth in all directions.

One other factor made this site especially attractive to the tribe: They could buy large tracts of land without adversely affecting the lives of resident homeowners or the livelihood of community businesspeople. According to Boulware, the Ho-Chunks are absolutely committed to fostering the growth of local businesses, not displacing them. Concerned that this project be seen as an asset to the whole community, the Ho-Chunks felt being able to buy land that was essentially underused made the choice of this site a win-win solution for everyone.

Although the actual purchase of the land didn't begin until this March, Boulware and Dall had been meeting with Lynwood Mayor, Russell Melby since September 2003. Still in the process of considering different sites, Boulware said they felt an immediate sense of welcome and cooperation from Melby. For his part, Mayor Melby was struck by the professionalism, thoroughness and consideration that members of the Nation exhibited in all their meetings. When the tenth and last casino license was awarded to Rosemont, ending the possibility of a rival casino in Country Club Hills, the Ho-Chunks decided it was time to start purchasing land to turn their proposal into a reality. The process was particularly impressive because the entire purchase

of over 400 acres was completed in just two months. Melby later noted that many of the landowners involved in the sale had commented on how well the Ho-Chunks had handled the transaction every step of the way. Reflecting the tribe's perspective, Bowlware observed, "The reception we've gotten from everyone in Lynwood has been incredibly positive – simply amazing. We feel this project belongs as much to this community as it does to us."

In addition to negotiating with the officials of Lynwood, tribal representatives had also been meeting with the administration of neighboring Glenwood. Joe Christofanelli, Village Administrator of Glenwood, also chairs the Chamber of Commerce's Board of Economic Development. He, too, views the Ho-Chunk project enthusiastically, "The Chamber sees this as a major opportunity for economic growth. We've already had inquiries from developers in reaction to the announcement on May 3rd." Christofanelli is sure this will be followed by an even greater wave of interest when ground is broken. And once the center is actually up and running – well, the general feeling seems to be that the Chicago Southland and the Ho-Chunk Nation may well hit the economic development jackpot.

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