



# Desert Trail

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## Casino groundbreaking nears

By JIMMY BIGGERSTAFF / Special to The Trail

JOSHUA TREE — The Municipal Advisory Council here got an update about the NŶwŶ Casino project that is scheduled to break ground on Chemehuevi tribal land in Twentynine Palms in about three weeks.

Gary Kovall, a legal representative for the tribe, told MAC members the tribe is responding to several hundred public comments received about the project's environmental assessment.

There were concerns about traffic, Kovall said, characterizing the written comments as mild. "No one makes positive comments on an E.A.," Kovall added.

The 160-acre project site borders Joshua Tree National Park.

Plans include cutting hiking trails into the hillside above the casino. Because the reservation is located in "a nasty flood plain," Kovall advised, "a tremendous amount of grading has to occur."

Future construction includes a hotel of up to six stories, possibly less, Kovall said. Artistic renderings of the construction show structures blending into the landscape, with the exception of a verdant golf course.

"The tribe has no present interest in a golf course," Kovall said as the PowerPoint presentation gave a rotating aerial view of the project, as though the viewer were in a helicopter hovering over the property. The scene depicted the fairways and greens of a golf course.

Wastewater will be treated on-site; the reclaimed water will be used to irrigate landscaping. Engineers are designing solar power into the project.

Plans call for 350 slot machines and an undetermined number of gaming tables. In response to a question from the audience, Kovall said there are no plans for off-track betting at the casino.

Tribal representatives are negotiating with the Sportsman's Club of Joshua Tree and other charitable organizations that sponsor bingo games about whether the casino's offerings should include bingo. A bowling alley and billiards room also are being discussed.

A banquet/convention room is planned along with multiple restaurants. The original concept for the reservation was only for an RV campground, but Kovall said the casino was added because it made economic sense for the tribe.

"The casino will not be lit up like Spotlight 29," Kovall assured the audience, addressing local sensitivities about night skies, especially as they relate to an observatory that is planned a few miles away.

Casino construction will employ local labor "as much as practical," the representative promised. When it opens next year, Kovall said the complex will employ about 200 people "with great wages and benefits."

One person questioned the method employed to determine the absence of desert tortoises on the property, claiming the study was done in just one day. Kovall responded that the study was conducted in accordance with applicable environmental regulations on the subject.

Kovall prefaced his remark by saying that he didn't mean to be crass, but reminded the audience that the Endangered Species Act does not apply to the tribe the way it applies to other entities, because the tribe is sovereign on its land.

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