

## **Casino Will Damage Our Quality of Life**

**By Ed Lynch**

To borrow a line from Meredith Willson's "The Music Man," we've got trouble, my friend, right here in River City.

We certainly do, but for us the threat isn't a pool hall but a casino. It's the one the Cowlitz Indian Tribe and its partner, The Mohegan Tribe of Connecticut, want to construct west of Interstate 5 near La Center. If the tribe succeeds in getting the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to take this 152-acre site into "trust," I'm convinced the gargantuan gambling complex they build will severely damage the quality of life we've worked so hard over the years to develop.

While an environmental impact statement is being prepared, consider that the proposed gambling/hotel/shopping/parking complex (8,500 cars) would be half again as big as any in the state, approaching the size of the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. Its cumulative impacts will damage forever the surrounding rural community.

If approved, it makes a mockery of existing zoning requirements and shatters any hope for our commissioners to manage growth in one of the state's fastest growing counties.

Added pressure on the beleaguered I-5 Bridge will stretch costly traffic backups by hours and for years to come.

Through their gambling operations the Cowlitz Tribe would become the largest employer in the area, with thousands of jobs. And as a sovereign nation the casino owners would become the single most powerful economic and political force in Clark County, with the capacity to purchase and remove additional lands from the tax rolls.

Connecticut-based Indian gaming expert and author Jeff Benedict has long observed both the Mohegan Sun and its sister casino, Foxwoods, in his state. According to Benedict, "Casino money costs us a lot more than it's worth." He says local schools are choked with the kids of low-income casino workers, while roads, fire, ambulance, police and other services are negatively impacted. Benedict also notes the considerable social costs, including additional crime, child abuse, divorces, bankruptcies and foreclosures.

The proposed La Center Casino site is a clear case of "reservation shopping" in order to capitalize on the nearby metropolitan area. I'm no historian, but I can read. The Cowlitz Tribe is not indigenous to Clark County, as the Federal Indian

Claims Commission determined in 1971 after many years of study. The BIA acknowledged the Cowlitz as a federally recognized tribe in 2000 but found that the Lewis River Indians were not a part of the Cowlitz Tribe. The proposed casino is the first significant connection between the Cowlitz Tribe and Clark County. This was the home of the Chinook and Klickitat tribes.

### **Better near ancestral home**

The Cowlitz Tribe is right to provide economic opportunity and support for its members. They would clearly have less difficulty, and be more forthright, if they establish a reservation (and casino site) within the area of their own ancestral home, for example near Kelso, Olequa or Toledo, all of which are on original Cowlitz village sites.

Last year, Clark County commissioners signed a “Memorandum of Understanding” with the Cowlitz, as a protective measure hoping to offset some of the impacts of the proposed casino complex. In return, the county would provide the tribe certain services. Unfortunately, the agreement’s very existence has given the impression to many that the county approves of the project. Far from it. In fact, the county commissioners approved a separate resolution at the time, disclaiming any “support for or endorsement of” the tribe’s trust application.

This issue is important because, despite what the Cowlitz Tribe would have us believe, this casino is far from a done deal. There are very serious unanswered questions and a lot to prove to the BIA before a decision is made. However, each agreement the tribe makes with a school district or community to mitigate impacts is used to make it appear there is approval all around. To those negotiating, I want to say your agreement doesn’t require your support for the project, and if you must sign one, I hope the agreement reflects that.

For the rest of us, it is time to pick up our tools and go to work. The BIA needs to hear our collective voice opposing this fiasco. If you believe as I do, please join me in writing them and help retain the quality of life and character of our community. Send your correspondence to: Michael Olson, Assistant Secretary, Department of the Interior – BIA, 1849 C Street NW, Washington, DC 20240.