

# The Oregonian

## **The big gamble in the gorge**

**Blocking a casino at Cascade Locks would push the project toward an even worse site in the Columbia Gorge**

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The conservation groups promising to turn out in force at public hearings that begin this week on the Warm Springs tribes' proposed casino in Cascade Locks are gambling with the very thing they most treasure -- the spectacular beauty of the Columbia Gorge.

Friends of the Columbia Gorge and other groups say they will strongly urge the Bureau of Indian Affairs to reject the tribes' request that the agency take into trust their off-reservation land in Cascade Locks and allow a casino there. That's fine, but every self-appointed defender of the gorge ought to understand the potential consequences of stopping the casino at Cascade Locks. It will prompt the Warm Springs to pursue a casino on a prominent headland near Hood River in the middle of the most beautiful stretch of the gorge.

Most experts on Indian gaming law believe the Warm Springs can legally build a casino on their long-owned hillside land near Hood River. Gov. Ted Kulongoski recognized that the state faced an either-or choice -- Hood River or a compromise site at Cascade Locks.

Kulongoski refused to gamble with the gorge. He has worked out a fair and innovative compact with the Warm Springs while guiding the casino to the best possible site in the gorge, a low-lying industrial area in Cascade Locks.

Most townspeople support the casino. Even there it will have negative impacts, including a big increase in Interstate 84 traffic. But it would not be a visual blight on the gorge, nothing like it would be perched near Hood River.

Critics have assailed the tribes and the governor for their agreement to build the casino in Cascade Locks. Former friends of the Warm Springs, the Grand Ronde tribes, have bankrolled negative TV ads blasting the governor. The Grand Ronde tribes are, of course, looking out for themselves. A casino in the gorge would threaten their money machine, the Spirit Mountain Casino, now the closest large tribal casino to the lucrative Portland market.

Most of the arguments against the Cascade Locks casino are disingenuous. Some are outrageous, including the portrayal of the Warm Springs tribes as intruders coming to despoil the gorge. The tribes roamed the Columbia Gorge for thousands of years and still have strong treaty rights there. It is a perverse

twisting of history to depict them as outsiders who have no business setting foot in the gorge.

Meanwhile, the Grand Ronde and other tribes trying to protect their own casino profits claim Cascade Locks would be Oregon's first off-reservation casino and set a dangerous precedent. Some have warned that if the Warm Springs tribes are allowed to build in Cascade Locks, they will be coming with a casino to a city near you.

In fact, only three of the nine tribal casinos now operating in Oregon sit on land that was inside reservation boundaries in 1988, when Congress approved the tribal gaming law. The casinos operated by the Grand Ronde, the Siletz and other tribes sit on sites that required acts of Congress to make them eligible for casinos. In fact, they were Oregon's first off-reservation casinos.

This page is no fan of expanded legalized gambling. It has opposed various proposals by the Grand Ronde and other tribes to open casinos in Portland and Salem. If the question at hand now in the Columbia Gorge were a straightforward yes or no to a casino in Cascade Locks, we would oppose it.

But the governor's legal advisers say the state probably cannot stop the tribes from building on their land near Hood River. The Grand Ronde tribes, of course, are playing their own game. But everyone else who professes a love for the gorge and then urges the government to block the casino at Cascade Locks is doing nothing more than rolling the dice.