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Tribe eagerly awaits road to future casino

Miwoks of Shingle Springs plan to break ground, with Caltrans OK, at month's end.

By Cathy Locke - Bee Staff Writer

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Groundbreaking for a Highway 50 interchange to serve a planned Indian casino in Shingle Springs is tentatively scheduled for late this month.

"It's exciting," said Elaine Whitehurst, a member of the tribal council for the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians.

Reached on her cell phone last week, Whitehurst said she was ordering T-shirts for the invitation-only event, planned for April 26. The tribe plans to open the casino in fall 2008.

The date is contingent on receiving state Department of Transportation permits for the project, said Rod Wilson, community relations representative for the Shingle Springs Rancheria.

"Today, we do not have the Caltrans permits, but we expect them to be completed soon," Wilson said.

The interchange will provide direct access to 160 acres of tribal land north of Highway 50, between Shingle Springs Drive and Greenstone Road.

The project has been entangled in lawsuits for years and remains the subject of an appeal by the citizens group Voices for Rural Living, which opposes the casino. But the state's 3rd District Court of Appeal last month denied the group's motion to prohibit construction on the interchange from proceeding until the case is resolved.

For now, access to the rancheria is over narrow roads maintained by a neighboring homeowners association.

The lack of access has restricted activities on the rancheria to the extent that the tribe had to locate its health clinic off-site.

Once Caltrans issues the permits, Wilson said, the tribe will finalize an agreement with the contractor, Rancho Cordova-based C.C. Myers Inc.

Wilson said building the interchange is expected to take 14 to 16 months.

Once a construction road is in place allowing heavy equipment to access the rancheria, work will begin on the casino, he said.

That project also will take about 16 months, Wilson said.

The 85,000-square-foot Foothill Oaks Casino will be nestled into a hillside, out of sight of Highway 50.

The tribe overcame a major hurdle in September when it reached an agreement with El Dorado County, which had filed lawsuits to block the interchange and casino, citing concerns about traffic and economic impacts.

Under the agreement, the tribe will pay the county at least \$190 million over 20 years. The pact includes \$104 million for construction of diamond lanes on Highway 50 to help handle the anticipated increase in traffic.

In the months since signing the agreement with the county, the tribe has stepped up its community

outreach, with representatives making presentations to area chambers of commerce and civic groups.

In an advertisement that ran last week in The Bee, the tribe solicited applications from people interested in filling seats on the Shingle Springs Tribal Gaming Authority's Management Board.

Board members, who must have gaming experience, will be responsible for making decisions on development of the casino.

Whitehurst said applicants need not be of Indian heritage.

"We need qualified people from the public," she said.

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