



# United States Department of the Interior

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## Memorandum

**To:** Regional Directors, Bureau of Indian Affairs  
George Skibine, Office of Indian Gaming

**From:** Assistant Secretary Carl Artman

**Date:** January 3, 2008

**Subject:** Guidance on taking off-reservation land into trust for gaming purposes

The Department currently has pending 30 applications from Indian tribes to take off-reservation land into trust for gaming purposes as part of the 25 U.S.C. § 2719(b)(1)(A) two-part determination. Many of the applications involve land that is a considerable distance from the reservation of the applicant tribe; for example, one involves land that is 1400 miles from the tribe's reservation. Processing these applications is time-consuming and resource-intensive in an area that is constrained by a large backlog and limited human resources.

The decision whether to take land into trust, either on-reservation or off-reservation, is discretionary with the Secretary. Section 151.11 of 25 C.F.R. Part 151 sets forth the factors the Department will consider when exercising this discretionary authority with respect to "tribal requests for the acquisition of lands in trust status, when the land is located outside of and noncontiguous to the tribe's reservation." Section 151.11(b) contains two provisions of particular relevance to applications that involve land that is a considerable distance from the reservation. It states that, as the distance between the tribe's reservation and the land to be acquired increases, the Secretary shall give:

- 1) greater scrutiny to the tribe's justification of anticipated benefits from the acquisition; and
- 2) greater weight to concerns raised by state and local governments as to the acquisition's potential impacts on regulatory jurisdiction, real property taxes and special assessments.

Part 151, however, does not further elaborate on how or why the Department is to give "greater scrutiny" and "greater weight" to these factors as the distance increases. The purpose of this guidance is to clarify how those terms are to be interpreted and applied,

particularly when considering the taking of off-reservation land into trust status for gaming purposes.

### Core Principles

As background to the specific guidance that follows, it is important to restate the core principles that underlie the Part 151 regulations and that should inform the Department's interpretation of, and decisions under, those regulations. The Part 151 regulations implement the trust land acquisition authority given to the Secretary by the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (IRA), 25 U.S.C. § 465. The IRA was primarily intended to redress the effects of the discredited policy of allotment, which had sought to divide up the tribal land base among individual Indians and non-Indians, and to destroy tribal governments and tribal identity. To assist in restoring the tribal land base, the IRA gives the Secretary the authority to: 1) return "to tribal ownership the remaining surplus lands of any Indian reservation" that had been opened to sale or disposal under the public land laws; 2) consolidate Indian ownership of land holdings within reservations by acquiring and exchanging interests of both Indians and non-Indians; and 3) acquire, in his discretion, interests in lands "within or without existing reservations". The IRA contains also provisions strengthening tribal governments and facilitating their operation. The policy of the IRA, which was just the opposite of allotment, is to provide a tribal land base on which tribal communities, governed by tribal governments, could exist and flourish. Consistent with the policy, the Secretary has typically exercised discretion regarding trust land acquisition authority to take lands into trust that are within, or in close proximity to, existing reservations.

The IRA has nothing directly to do with Indian gaming. The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988 (IGRA), 25 U.S.C. § 2701 et seq., adopted more than 50 years after the IRA, sets the parameters of Indian gaming. One requirement is that if gaming is to occur on off-reservation lands those lands must be trust lands "over which an Indian tribe exercises governmental power." The authority to acquire trust lands, however, is derived from the IRA; no trust land acquisition authority is granted to the Secretary by IGRA. The Department has taken the position that although IGRA was intended to promote the economic development of tribes by facilitating Indian gaming operations, it was not intended to encourage the establishment of Indian gaming facilities far from existing reservations. Whether land should be taken into trust far from existing reservations for gaming purposes is a decision that must be made pursuant to the Secretary's IRA authority.

### Implementation of Guidance

This guidance should be implemented as follows:

1. All pending applications or those received in the future should be initially reviewed in accordance with this guidance. The initial review should precede any effort (if it is not already underway) to comply with the NEPA requirements of section 151.10(h).

2. If the initial review reveals that the application fails to address, or does not adequately address, the issues identified in this guidance, the application should be denied and the tribe promptly informed. This denial does not preclude the tribe from applying for future off-reservation acquisitions for gaming or other purposes. However, those future applications will be subject to these same guidelines.
3. A greater scrutiny of the justification of the anticipated benefits and the giving greater weight to the local concerns must still be given to all off-reservation land into trust applications, as required in 25 C.F.R. § 151.11(b). This memorandum does not diminish that responsibility, but only provides guidance for those applications that exceed a daily commutable distance from the reservation.

### Greater Scrutiny of Anticipated Benefits

The guidance in this section applies to all applications, pending or yet to be received, that involve requests to take land into trust that is off-reservation. Reviewers must, in accordance with the regulations at 25 C.F.R. 151.11(b), “give greater scrutiny to the tribe’s justification of anticipated benefits from the acquisition” as the distance between the acquisition and the tribe’s reservation increases. The reviewer should apply this greater scrutiny as long as the requested acquisition is off-reservation regardless of the mileage between the tribe’s reservation and proposed acquisition. If the proposed acquisition exceeds a commutable distance from the reservation the reviewer, at a minimum, should answer the questions listed below to help determine the benefits to the tribe. A commutable distance is considered to be the distance a reservation resident could reasonably commute on a regular basis to work at a tribal gaming facility located off-reservation

As noted above, section 151.11(b) requires the Secretary to “give greater scrutiny to the tribe’s justification of anticipated benefits from the acquisition” of trust land “as the distance between the tribe’s reservation and the land to be acquired increases.” The reason for this requirement is that, as a general principle, the farther the economic enterprise - in this case, a gaming facility - is from the reservation, the greater the potential for significant negative consequences on reservation life.

Tribes typically view off-reservation gaming facilities as providing two economic benefits to the tribe. The first is the income stream from the gaming facility, which can be used to fund tribal services, develop tribal infrastructure, and provide per capita payments to tribal members, and thus can have a positive effect on reservation life. Obviously, the income stream from a gaming facility is not likely to decrease as the distance from the reservation increases. In fact, off-reservation sites are often selected for gaming facilities because they provide better markets for gaming and potentially greater income streams than sites on or close to the reservation.

The second benefit of off-reservation gaming facilities is the opportunity for job training and employment of tribal members. With respect to this benefit, the location of the

gaming facility can have significant negative effects on reservation life that potentially worsen as the distance increases. If the gaming facility is not within a commutable distance of the reservation, tribal members who are residents of the reservation will either: a) not be able to take advantage of the job opportunities if they desire to remain on the reservation; or b) be forced to move away from the reservation to take advantage of the job opportunity.

In either case, the negative impacts on reservation life could be considerable. In the first case, the operation of the gaming facility would not directly improve the employment rate of tribal members living on the reservation. High on-reservation unemployment rates, with their attendant social ills, are already a serious problem on many reservations. A gaming operation on or close to the reservation allows the tribe to alleviate this situation by using their gaming facility as a conduit for job training and employment programs for tribal members. Provision of employment opportunities to reservation residents promotes a strong tribal government and tribal community. Employment of tribal members is an important benefit of tribal economic enterprises.

In the second case, the existence of the off-reservation facility would require or encourage reservation residents to leave the reservation for an extended period to take advantage of the job opportunities created by the tribal gaming facility. The departure of a significant number of reservation residents and their families could have serious and far-reaching implications for the remaining tribal community and its continuity as a community. While the financial benefits of the proposed gaming facility might create revenues for the applicant tribe and may mitigate some potential negative impacts, no application to take land into trust beyond a commutable distance from the reservation should be granted unless it carefully and comprehensively analyzes the potential negative impacts on reservation life and clearly demonstrates why these are outweighed by the financial benefits of tribal ownership in a distant gaming facility.

As stated above, some of the issues that need to be addressed in the application if the land is to be taken into trust is off-reservation and for economic development are:

What is the unemployment rate on the reservation? How will it be affected by the operation of the gaming facility?

How many tribal members (with their dependents) are likely to leave the reservation to seek employment at the gaming facility? How will their departure affect the quality of reservation life?

How will the relocation of reservation residents affect their long-term identification with the tribe and the eligibility of their children and descendants for tribal membership?

What are the specifically identified on-reservation benefits from the proposed gaming facility? Will any of the revenue be used to create on-reservation job opportunities?

As long as it remains the policy of the Federal government to support and encourage growth of reservations governed by tribal governments, these are important questions that must be addressed before decisions about off-reservation trust land acquisitions are made. The Department should not use its IRA authority to acquire land in trust in such a way as to defeat or hinder the purpose of the IRA. It should be noted that tribes are free to pursue a wide variety of off-reservation business enterprises and initiatives without the approval or supervision of the Department. It is only when the enterprises involve the taking of land into trust, as is required for off-reservation Indian gaming facilities, that the Department must exercise its IRA authority.

### Greater Weight

Section 151.11(b) also requires the Secretary to give "greater weight" than he might otherwise to the concerns of state and local governments. Under the regulations, state and local governments are to be immediately notified of a tribe's application to take land into trust, and are to file their comments in writing no later than 30 days after receiving notice. The reviewer must give a greater weight to the concerns of the state and local governments no matter what the distance is between the tribe's reservation and the proposed off-reservation acquisition. This is the second part of the two part review required by section 151.11(b).

The regulations identify two sets of state and local concerns that need to be given "greater weight:" 1) jurisdictional problems and potential conflicts of land use; and 2) the removal of the land from the tax rolls. The reason for this requirement of giving "greater weight" is two-fold. First, the farther from the reservation the proposed trust acquisition is, the more the transfer of Indian jurisdiction to that parcel of land is likely to disrupt established governmental patterns. The Department has considerable experience with the problems posed by checkerboard patterns of jurisdiction. Distant local governments are less likely to have experience dealing with and accommodating tribal governments with their unique governmental and regulatory authorities. Second, the farther from the reservation the land acquisition is, the more difficult it will be for the tribal government to efficiently project and exercise its governmental and regulatory powers.

With respect to jurisdictional issues, the application should include copies of any intergovernmental agreements negotiated between the tribe and the state and local governments, or an explanation as to why no such agreements exist. Failure to achieve such agreements should weigh heavily against the approval of the application.

With respect to land use issues, the application should include a comprehensive analysis as to whether the proposed gaming facility is compatible with the current zoning and land use requirements of the state and local governments, and with the uses being made of adjacent or contiguous land, and whether such uses would be negatively impacted by the traffic, noise, and development associated with or generated by the proposed gaming facility. Incompatible uses might consist of adjacent or contiguous land zoned or used for: National Parks, National Monuments, Federally designated conservation areas,

National Fish and Wildlife Refuges, day care centers, schools, churches, or residential developments. If the application does not contain such an analysis, it should be denied.

### Conclusion

The Office of Indian Gaming will review the current applications. If an application is denied subsequent to this review, the applicant tribe will be notified immediately. Tribes receiving a denial subsequent to this review may resubmit the application with information that will satisfy the regulations. Regional directors shall use this clarification to guide their recommendations or determinations on future applications to take off-reservation land into trust.