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From left, Frank, Richard and D.K. Sprague are part of the Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians.

With Casino, Tribe Looks For New Roots

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(Editor's note: This is the final installment of a series of stories examining potential economic and public impact in the vicinity of the planned Gun Lake Casino.)

BRADLEY — Tucked onto a dirt road off Sixth Street in unincorporated Wayland Township, the Bradley Indian Mission Church is wrapping up its first significant expansion project in modern history.



On the day the Business Journal visited Bradley, a plastic tarp wrapped around an open section of the west wall, where in the intervening weeks a small room separated by an accordion wall was constructed. Initially, the space will be used for small gatherings, and as needed, will provide additional seating space for its Sunday morning services.

Rebuilt from the ground up in 1914, the 40-member franchise of the United Methodist Church is expecting a host of new members as the economic development efforts of the Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians gets under way in the coming months with anticipated groundbreaking for Gun Lake Casino.

"I think the employment opportunities will bring tribal members back to the area from Grand Rapids or Kalamazoo or wherever they are located now," says Tribe Chairman D.K. Sprague. "It's going to reestablish the reservation we had here. We're seeing people come back to the old mission, and we're hoping the casino development will fill that little church up."

The mission, then affiliated with the Episcopalian church, protected the Gun Lake Tribe from forced relocation to reservation land in the late 1830s. The followers of Chief Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish settled on the 109 acres around the mission, and over the following century, those dozen or so families dispersed across West Michigan in search of employment. Much of the land today is leased to nearby farmers. The church and cemetery are maintained by the remaining members.

In the eyes of the U.S. government, the band was swallowed by the Ottawa and Chippewa nations until Chief Jacob Sprague, D.K.'s uncle, began a fight for federal recognition in the 1950s. Forty years after that last chief's death, the Bradley Settlement Elders Council petitioned the Bureau of Indian Affairs for formal recognition.

When that request was granted in 1999, the tribe's subsequent announcement of plans to develop a casino in Wayland Township began perhaps the most controversial economic development campaign in West Michigan history. Last Friday, oral arguments in what should be the last stage of a lengthy federal court challenge to the casino were heard by a panel of judges in Washington, D.C. A decision is expected within the month, and barring a dramatic turn of events, construction will begin in early 2008 on the conversion of the former Ampro facility on 129th Avenue into a potential \$250 million gaming facility.

"Ampro was close to home and a great location," said John Shagonaby, tribe vice chairman and CEO of MBPI Inc., the tribe's business entity. "We looked at a number of potential sites, but this one we knew we could build around."



Pictured, from left, are Elsie De Jong, Friends of the Gun Lake Indians member; Kathy

Amidst high-profile political and legal battles related to the casino, the tribe has quietly worked to establish a functioning community in the Wayland area. From its headquarters in a Dorr Township strip mall, MBPI has swelled to two dozen employees, and now offers a variety of health and human services to its 325 members. The multimillion-dollar Luella Collins Community Center was completed last year on 41 acres overlooking Boot Lake, one mile southwest of the mission site.

executive director of the Wayland Area Chamber of Commerce; Marcia Halloran, FOGLI co-founder; and Judy Bott, FOGLI member and owner of O'Neil's Restaurant & Pub in Middleville.

Not unrelated to its casino ambitions, the tribe has worked hard to make friends. Its lobbyist, Noel LaPorte, has introduced the band to allies such as the Deputy Sheriff's Association of Michigan and the West Michigan Tourist Association. The region's various labor organizations have lent their support, while the tribe itself has reached out to surrounding school districts, municipalities and citizens.

"Long before this came around, the tribe had been valuable members of the community," said Jackie Straub, executive director of the Wayland Area Chamber of Commerce. "They've given back to the community in so many ways without even talking about the casino. If you look at the tribe's new cultural center, you can see a good example of the thought and commitment they've made to keeping Allegan County beautiful."

Built from natural materials and landscaped with native plants, the community building has become the cultural center of the tribe and, to a lesser extent, the surrounding community. It is the largest gathering venue in Wayland Township and has been frequently used for weddings and other gatherings by non-tribal members. The facility is available to tribal members at no cost and to local residents for a nominal fee.

Through the federal Indian Reservation Roads program, the tribe is providing Wayland Township with a \$200,000 grant for a \$290,000 road project repaving Sixth Street, which connects the Ampro facility to the mission site on 128th Avenue and the community center on 126th Avenue.

"That was something the tribe came up with on its own," said Roger Van Volkinburg, Wayland Township supervisor. "They've had their fights on the state level, but not on the local level. They've been good neighbors and good partners."

The primary opposition groups have not been active in the Wayland area for quite some time. Grand Rapids-based PAC 23 is Enough, a loose affiliation of West Michigan politicians and businessmen, has functionally disbanded. Moline-based Michigan Gambling Opposition, which brought the federal lawsuit against the tribe, did not return repeated calls and e-mails for comment.

Ironically, it was these groups' intervention that led to the creation of the tribe's strongest link to the community, the Friends of the Gun Lake Indians. Now more than 10,000 strong, FOGLI began after a disastrous casino informational session at Wayland High School. A number of anti-casino protestors disrupted the event, and the following week's

coverage in the Penasse Globe, the Wayland paper of record, reported racial slurs and intimidation.

"This was when there was still a chance the casino was going to be in Dorr, and my husband and I weren't sure how we felt about it," said FOGLI co-founder Marcia Halloran, a Dorr resident who attended the meeting. "We left there ashamed and embarrassed with the way (the protestors) behaved."

Judy Bott, a Byron Center resident and owner of O'Neil's Restaurant & Pub in Middleville, read about the protest in the paper: "I felt the same way. I just called into the (tribe) office and asked what I could do to help."

Since its launch in 2001, FOGLI has hosted job fairs and rallies. Of late, it has served largely to promote the economic development potential of the casino and as a citizens' advocate to legislators and community leaders. BJX