

Introducing the Poarch Band, Homewood's future neighbors

BY ANGELA DENK

adenk@hfchronicle.com

Wind Creek Hospitality, the Alabama-based company that has been pre-approved by the Illinois Gaming Board to operate a casino and hotel just off Interstate 80 where Homewood and East Hazel Crest meet, started out in a bingo hall.

Built on a reservation belonging to the Poarch Band of Creek Indians in southeast Alabama, the wooden hall hosted games played with paper cards and held occasional 24-hour lock-ins, according to Arthur Mothershed, a Poarch Band Tribal Council member and executive vice president of business development and government relations for Wind Creek.

Tribal History

The Poarch Creek Reservation covers just over 300 acres about 50 miles northeast of Mobile and just a few miles north of the Florida state line. It is fully inside what was the Creek Nation, a territory that once stretched from the southeastern Atlantic coast westward through most of Alabama. Over time, the territory shrank as land was ceded—piecemeal—to colonizers. Around the time of the War of 1812, those who wanted to fight Andrew Jackson and his men began calling themselves Red Sticks — said to be a reference to their traditional red-painted war clubs. Others — deemed White Sticks by historians — chose to cooperate with the Americans. They began adapting to some of their European ways, while the Red Sticks remained committed to their native culture.

In July of 1813, war broke out between the Red Sticks (aided at times by British traders and the Spanish who saw the alliance as a way to stem the tide of American expansion) and the U.S. government and its allies, the Choctaw, the Cherokee, and the White Sticks. In August of 1814, the Red Sticks lost the Creek Indian War, and a large piece of the Creek Nation was given over to the United States.

When the U.S. government's sweep removal program began in 1830, approximately 22,000 Creek Indians were forced to walk west toward modern day Oklahoma. According to today's Poarch Band, approximately half of those who



Provided photo

Annual pow wows feature competitive dancing and allow young members of the Poarch Band of the Creek Indian tribe to experience their culture.

were forced to leave, including their chief, perished on the Trail of Tears. A small handful of Creek families — those who had worked as scouts or been otherwise useful to U.S. forces — were permitted to remain in the region and received small land grants. Those few who remained in Alabama came to be called the Poarch Band of Creek Indians.

Although the Poarch Creek Band was spared the suffering of walking west, they were not untouched by removal, nor were they immune to the injustices dealt to all native people as the United States expanded. They lost loved ones and they were subjected to discriminatory practices that shrank their land holdings and diminished their access to education and other community resources in the years after removal.

Tribal recognition

In 1984, the Poarch Band of Creek Indians was formally recognized as a sovereign nation by the U.S. government. Today, most of the tribe's 2,800 members live in the area surrounding Atmore, Alabama, where the reservation maintains its municipal and community offices and centers. Two fire stations, an assisted living facility, a "state of the art" health clinic and dental clinic are among the services on the reservation that Mothershed said are funded

by Wind Creek revenue. Additionally, the casino money provides per capita income as well as up to \$100,000 to put toward furthering education for each member of the tribe.

Business/community development

Mothershed said Wind Creek funds community development — something he sees separately from community support — and that work takes place wherever they do business.

"Back in 1985, we didn't have a whole lot of resources for ourselves, so it was difficult to share, but giving back was part of this from day one," he said. "In the early 2000s, when we got into what's called 'electronic bingo,' it became a little bit more lucrative business for us. We started giving to local churches and charities. Between 2009 and 2014 is when our business became what it is today."

Wind Creek operates 10 gambling sites, from full resort-style casinos to poker rooms, around the globe. The little bingo hall in Atmore has been replaced with a full-service casino that features dining, bowling, an arcade, a hotel and a spa.

Mothershed said between 2013 and 2021, the gaming corporation has donated \$85 million to community organizations and initiatives where they do business. Wind Creek, he said, is com-

mitted to developing and aiding the communities in which they operate. In the case of the planned South Suburbs casino, Mothershed said Wind Creek has proposed a give-back structure.

"One of the big things is the Southland Public Benefit Fund we've entered into with Advocate [Health Care], South Suburban College, Prairie State College and Moraine Valley Community College to fund public health programs," Mothershed said. "We've committed to contributing \$2 million for the first five years...and we are working with local pastors to identify true needs specific to the area and to understand what their concerns and needs are."

Brent Pinkston, Chief Operating Officer for Wind Creek, said when Wind Creek comes to town, employment opportunities abound. Poarch Band of Creek Indians Chairwoman and CEO Stephanie A. Bryan, agrees.

"We know that gaming done the right way offers opportunities for economic development and job creation that can improve the quality of life in the communities where we make long-term investments," Bryan stated.

According to Pinkston, the 15-month casino construction and additional nine-month hotel buildout will create 600 temporary jobs, with an estimated 800 permanent jobs once the business is up and running.

"We focus on creating full-time versus part-time," Pinkston said. "We like to stay close to [creating] 90% full-time jobs, then fill in with part-time employees as needed. Our goal is to have as many full-time positions as possible. We find that when it comes to guest service and giving them the best experience, retaining mostly full-time employees is the best strategy."

Mothershed added that when talking with local government in the Southland, Wind Creek pledged to focus on bringing in local employees from diverse backgrounds.

"We will hire local folks from Illinois and make a targeted effort to have minority participation," Mothershed said.

Should everything proceed without a hitch or alteration, Wind Creek will open its doors here in the fall of 2023.

"The Poarch Band of Creek Indians is excited and honored to bring our business to Illinois and be a part of the greater Chicago Southland," Bryan said.

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