

Chippewas rake in casino nixed by London

TORONTO -Charity casino operators rebuffed by the city of London have finally found a willing host for their gambling parlor — a nearby First Nations community.

The Chippewas of the Thames band southwest of London decided the economic benefits for a reserve with 60-per-cent unemployment far outweighed any negative impact, its leader said Friday.

“It really is about being able to put food on the table,” said Chief Kelly Riley in an interview.

“If we can put a number of families to work in the operation, you’ll have families with an income and with jobs who are able to buy more, and maybe that will stimulate small business in the community.”

If given final government endorsement, the facility is expected to bring more than 700 permanent jobs and a \$25-million annual payroll to a community whose population is just 2,000.

The province approved 44 of the mini casinos for cities and towns across Ontario last year, but amid fear of widespread compulsive gambling problems most of the communities said they didn’t want them.

That’s what happened in London after the province awarded tentative contracts for two of the gaming halls in that area.

Operators Trillium Gaming Inc. and Fundtime Corp. began looking at other sites. The reserve had come close three years ago to winning a much larger, commercial-scale aboriginal casino, which eventually went to the Rama band near Orillia

Instead of having two separate charity casinos, the companies decided to combine them in one site.

Just seven minutes north of Highway 401 and 25 minutes from downtown London, the location should be good for business, said Fundtime spokesman John Chalmers.

He said he hopes the \$15-million facility will be up and running by next spring, and will be able to offer jobs to at least some of the reserve’s residents.

The government still must give its final approval to the location, once the specific site is chosen and the operators submit a business plan, said Hillary Stauth, spokeswoman for the department running the casinos.

But the province is pleased with the deal, she said.

About a dozen other communities have given the green light to charity casinos but the first isn’t likely to open until the end of the year, said Stauth.

They were all supposed to be up and running by this past April 1, replacing a string of roving charity casinos that were closed down March 31.

In a bid to make the new policy more palatable, the government announced earlier this spring the casinos would contain slot machines, rather than video lottery terminals — the so-called crack cocaine of gambling.

Charities stand to receive as much as \$200 million, up from the \$10 million they got from the roving events.

But the bulk of the take goes to the government, which says it will earmark the money for health care projects.-CP-