



Who's the Indian tribe buying the Sands Bethlehem casino?

Article by: Andrew Wagaman and Jon Harris

Of The Morning Call

March 8, 2018

It's more than a thousand-mile drive from south Bethlehem to Exit 54 on Interstate 65, just across the border from the Florida Panhandle's northwestern corner. There you'll find Atmore, Ala., home for the past 150 years of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians.

Wind Creek Hospitality, a privately held entertainment and gambling company owned by the Poarch Creek Indians, has run a somewhat modest operation relative to other Native American gambling businesses that have proliferated over the past 30 years. Its properties have long been contained to southern Alabama and northwestern Florida.

But it's about to become a household name in the Lehigh Valley. Wind Creek announced Thursday it's [acquiring the Sands Casino Resort Bethlehem](#) property for \$1.3 billion.

The Poarch Creek Indians descend from part of the original Creek, or Muscogee, Nation that lived in Alabama and Georgia. Today a majority of the 3,000-member tribe lives in Escambia County, Ala.

The Poarch Band is the only federally recognized Indian tribe in Alabama, operating as a sovereign nation with its own system of government and bylaws.



An authority of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians

303 Poarch Rd., Atmore, AL 36502 | (866) 946-3360 | WindCreekHospitality.com | [@wchospitality](https://twitter.com/wchospitality)

Wind Creek Hospitality runs three casinos on tribal land in Alabama — one in Atmore, and two near Montgomery (Wind Creek Wetumpka and Wind Creek Montgomery). The casino floors are all on the smaller side, ranging from 85,000 square feet at Wetumpka to 57,000 square feet at Atmore. The casino floor at Sands Bethlehem, by comparison, is a little over 150,000 square feet.

Joseph Weinert, senior vice president of Spectrum Gaming Group, a consulting firm in Linwood, N.J., described the Bethlehem casino acquisition as a major leap for Wind Creek, likening the move to how the Mohegan Tribe in Connecticut entered the Pennsylvania commercial gambling arena with its Pocono facility.

While it's a big bite for Wind Creek, Weinert said they're respected as a gambling operator.

“They've developed some nice facilities in Alabama,” Weinert said. “This obviously is a major leap for the tribe, not just in terms of the size and performance of the asset, but also stepping into the U.S. commercial gaming industry.”

The tribe operates Class II games at its Alabama casinos, which means its gambling machines are bingo-based or have pull tab-based technology. That Class II designation means the tribe doesn't pay taxes, allowing it to quickly accumulate cash that it can reinvest in property.

Poarch Creek officials have long been interested in offering slot machines and tables and have told Alabama regulators they would be willing to share revenues generated by such games, the Alabama Media Group reported.

The company's venture northeast isn't the only move Wind Creek has recently made to expand beyond Alabama. In October, it acquired two gambling facilities in the Caribbean — the Renaissance Aruba Resort & Casino and the Renaissance Curacao Resort & Casino.



An authority of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians

303 Poarch Rd., Atmore, AL 36502 | (866) 946-3360 | WindCreekHospitality.com | [@wchospitality](https://twitter.com/wchospitality)

In 2016, the tribe made a deal to buy the Margaritaville Resort Casino in Bossier City, La., but the deal fell apart last year because of a disagreement over licensing terms for the Margaritaville name.

Wind Creek announced plans last year to build a casino in D'Iberville, Miss., on about 35 acres of land it acquired in 2016.

Wind Creek also owns majority stakes in, and operates, a simulcast greyhound and horse racing track in Mobile, and track and poker rooms in Pensacola and Gretna, Fla.

Additionally, it manages the Wa She Shu Casino in Gardnerville, Nev., owned by the Washoe Tribe.

John Cunnane, a Wall Street gambling and leisure analyst for Stifel, was surprised to hear the tribe is buying a property like Sands Bethlehem, given its inexperience operating table games, which are Sands Bethlehem's "bread and butter," Cunnane noted.

"This is jumping into the pool at the deepest end," Cunnane said. "This is a big acceleration. These guys haven't really been on a radar as domestic acquirers of assets.

"... They didn't buy Mount Airy. They bought Sands Bethlehem."

Further, Cunnane said, the Sands Bethlehem acquisition immediately raises the question of whether the tribe is interested in buying other assets, or if it's an isolated purchase.

The acquisition also may answer the at-first curious decision by Sands, the world's largest casino company, to bid on a mini-casino license near the Ohio border a couple



An authority of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians

303 Poarch Rd., Atmore, AL 36502 | (866) 946-3360 | WindCreekHospitality.com | [@wchospitality](https://twitter.com/wchospitality)

weeks ago, though that bid was invalidated for being too close to Mount Airy's planned location.

According to a source familiar with the deal, a mini-casino was discussed as part of the agreement with the tribe, though it's now unclear — after the bid was invalidated — whether or not Sands and the tribe will make another bid as the auction process continues.

If they do bid, Cunnane said that probably signals the tribe “may continue to build a network” expanding far beyond Exit 54 and Escambia County.

The Poarch Band invests in development beyond gambling. Last year its Creek Indian Enterprises Development Authority opened a \$260 million amusement park and event destination in Foley, Ala., called OWA.

WIND CREEK HOSPITALITY PROPERTIES

Wind Creek Hospitality, an entertainment and gambling company owned by Alabama's Poarch Band of Creek Indians, is acquiring the Sands Casino Resort Bethlehem property for \$1.3 billion.

Headquarters: Atmore, Ala.

Owned casinos: Wind Creek Atmore, Wind Creek Montgomery, Wind Creek Wetumpka, Renaissance Aruba Resort & Casino and the Renaissance Curacao Resort & Casino

Racetracks: Pensacola Greyhound Track and Poker Room, Creek Entertainment Gretna, Mobile Greyhound Park

Managed casinos: Wa She Shu Casino in Gardnerville, Nev., owned by the Washoe Tribe.



An authority of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians

303 Poarch Rd., Atmore, AL 36502 | (866) 946-3360 | WindCreekHospitality.com | [@wchospitality](https://twitter.com/wchospitality)

About Wind Creek Hospitality

Wind Creek Hospitality is an authority of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians. Wind Creek Hospitality manages the Tribe's gaming facilities including: Wind Creek Atmore, Wind Creek Wetumpka, Wind Creek Montgomery, Wa She Shu Casino in Nevada, Renaissance Aruba Resort & Casino, Renaissance Curacao Resort & Casino as well as racetracks in Alabama and Florida.

For more information, visit: <https://windcreekhospitality.com/>

About the Poarch Band of Creek Indians

The Poarch Band of Creek Indians is the only federally recognized Indian Tribe in the state of Alabama, operating as a sovereign nation with its own system of government and bylaws. The Tribe operates a variety of economic enterprises, which employ thousands of area residents.

For more information, visit: www.pci-nsn.gov

Forward Looking Statements

This press release contains forward-looking statements that are made pursuant to the Safe Harbor Provisions of the Private Securities Litigation Reform Act of 1995. Forward-looking statements involve a number of risks, uncertainties or other factors beyond the company's control, which may cause material differences in actual results, performance or other expectations. These factors include, but are not limited to, the uncertainty of whether the necessary regulatory approvals will be granted on a timely basis, if at all, and whether the sale will occur, delays in, or failures in respect of, anticipated satisfaction of closing conditions, ability of the buyer to secure the financing, whether the cash proceeds will be used as anticipated, and other factors. Readers are cautioned not to place undue reliance on these forward-looking statements, which speak only as of the date thereof. Wind Creek Hospitality assumes no obligation to update such information.



An authority of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians

303 Poarch Rd., Atmore, AL 36502 | (866) 946-3360 | WindCreekHospitality.com | [@wchospitality](https://twitter.com/wchospitality)

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

Wind Creek Hospitality

Magi Williams

Public Relations Manager

(251) 446-4293

mtwilliams@windcreekhospitality.com

or

Poarch Band of Creek Indians

Sharon Delmar

Public Relations Tribal Liaison

(251)-368-9136

sdelmar@pci-nsn.gov



An authority of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians

303 Poarch Rd., Atmore, AL 36502 | (866) 946-3360 | WindCreekHospitality.com | [@wchospitality](https://www.instagram.com/wchospitality)