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Morongo land dispute literally settled by an act of Congress

A developer will trade land almost surrounded by the reservation for like acreage north of Banning.

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Lloyd Fields, at left, participated in a June 2011 press conference where property owners protested conflicts between Native American tribes and non Indian property owners. He was in a dispute over access to land he owned in Banning. A Congressional bill signed by President Obama recently allowed the tribe and Fields to swap properties, ending the dispute.

KURT MILLER, FILE PHOTO

By GAIL WESSON / STAFF WRITER

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A land swap between the Morongo tribe and Beverly Hills landowner Lloyd Fields will resolve a more than



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LAND SWAP TIMELINE

1959: A road north of what is now Interstate 10 was named Fields Road for Lloyd Fields' father.

1986: The west side of the road was annexed to the city of Banning.

2011: Lloyd Fields, whose family had land holdings in the area for decades, filed a lawsuit against the city of Banning over a guard shack and gate erected by the Morongo Band of Mission Indians that he contended blocked access to 41 acres he owned that was nearly surrounded by reservation land.

2015: A congressional bill written to authorize a land swap passed the House of Representatives

2016: A companion bill passed in the Senate. It was recently signed into law by President Obama.

access to the 41 acres that he wanted to develop.

Friess called the land swap "about as good of an outcome as you could hope for."

Morongo Tribal Chairman Robert Martin said in the news release, "This legislation is a true win-win for the community and for generating future private economic development opportunities that will create jobs, housing and revenue for the region."

In Congress, the House version of the resolution was authored by Rep. Raul Ruiz, D-Palm Desert, with bipartisan support from Rep. Paul Cook, R-Yucca Valley. The Senate version was offered by Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif.

The legislation also establishes an easement enabling the city of Banning to improve utilities to the area.

Because the reservation land is held in tribal trust, the land swap legally required congressional approval.

Back in 2011, Banning approved a request from the tribe to rename Fields Road as Malki Road. The street, just north of the 10 freeway, is the main entrance to the reservation. It had been named for Fields' father in 1959.

Separately in recent years, the next freeway exit to the east, which had been known as Apache Trail, was renamed Morongo Trail.

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five-year-old dispute over access to an island of private property almost surrounded by reservation land.

And all it took was an act of Congress. Literally.

President Obama recently signed the congressional action involving a 41-acre triangular shaped piece of undeveloped land just west of Malki Road. It has been owned by the Fields family for over five decades. It is being swapped for a similar sized property that now is part of the Morongo Indian Reservation adjacent to the Banning city limits and east of North Hathaway Street.

The congressional bill eliminates a checkerboard effect on the reservation while simultaneously allowing for new economic development opportunities in the city's northeastern area, according to a news release from the Morongo Band of Mission Indians. No specific development plans were outlined in the release.

"It really was a good outcome," said Fields' attorney, Rick Friess. "It got the tribe property that was kind of a doughnut hole in their reservation. It got Mr. Fields equivalent value acres that wasn't particularly useful to the tribe that Mr. Fields can use with his other property."

The Irvine-based attorney had represented Fields in a lawsuit he filed against the city of Banning in 2011 over a guard shack and gate on what was then called Fields Road, now Malki Road. Part of the road was in the city limits, and part on the reservation.

He wanted a judge to force the city to move the structures, which he claimed in the lawsuit blocked

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