

Glendale, which has been fighting the proposed casino near its sports-and-entertainment district since it was announced in early 2009, is finding a warmer reception among this year's legislative leaders.

Two identical bills are on the fast track through the state Legislature to stop a proposed Indian casino in the West Valley.

Similar bills last year failed to make it through the

Senate, then presided over by Bob Burns, R-Peoria.

Sen. Russell Pearce, the new Senate president, has been a vocal opponent of the Tohono O'odham casino plans.

"It's not just a Glendale issue anymore," city lobbyist Brent Stoddard said. It's become a states' rights issue, he said.

The Tohono O'odham Nation wants to build a casino and resort on 54 acres it owns at 95th and Northern avenues, which is on the Peoria-Glendale border. The tribe in July obtained approval from the U.S. Department of Interior to designate the land as a reservation - a precursor to a gaming venue.

A lobbyist for the tribe, at the state Capitol this week, said the tribe was well within its legal rights, working under an act of Congress to replace reservation land damaged years ago by a federally built dam.

Glendale, the Gila River Indian Community and five of the tribe's members are challenging the federal decision. Four legislative leaders later joined the suit, which is expected to go before a U.S. district judge on Feb. 17.

Written by Administrator

Saturday, 22 January 2011 00:01 -

Senate Majority Leader Scott Bundgaard, R-Peoria, who introduced the Senate version of the bill, said it was important to fast-track the bill, getting it approved ahead of the court date.

Senate Bill 1136 and House Bill 2534 would allow Glendale to annex the tribe's land without its consent. The bill would allow certain cities to annex land without consent if the property owner asked the federal government to designate the land as a reservation. The city would have to surround the property or at least touch three sides, as is the case in Glendale.

Such an annexation could stop the tribe because its federal settlement requires that the land it seeks to turn into a reservation be in an unincorporated area, outside municipal boundaries.

Last year, former Senate President Burns said that the state should not weigh in on the issue. Pearce, R-Mesa, has a far different take. Pearce unsuccessfully sought to join Glendale and others in challenging the federal decision to place the land into the reservation system.

"The Democratic administration has a history of going after Arizona," Pearce said last fall. "I hope they have a little bit more respect for state rights."

Bundgaard, testifying before a Senate committee Thursday, said a "power grab" by the federal government led him to introduce the bill.

The bills are "fighting an overreaching, obtrusive federal government," Bundgaard said.

Both bills passed through committees on Thursday. The Senate bill is scheduled to be heard in the Rules Committee on Monday before going for a full floor vote.

Tohono O'odham lobbyist Knox Kimberly called the bills a "blatant attempt to thwart federal legislation."

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Written by Administrator

Saturday, 22 January 2011 00:01 -

Kimberly said state leaders have talked about job creation as a high priority yet the bills would stop development that is projected to bring in 6,000 construction jobs and 3,000 permanent jobs.

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