

Plan for casino near Glendale led to flurry of lobbying

Written by Administrator
Tuesday, 29 January 2013 07:56 -

By Ronald J. Hansen
2013 10:30 PM

The Republic | azcentral.com

Mon Jan 28,

A prospective tribal casino near Glendale drove the most lobbying in Washington by Arizona groups last year, federal records show.

The Tohono O'odham Nation, which hopes to add a Glendale-area casino to its three others outside the Valley, spent at least \$1.2 million lobbying lawmakers. At the same time, the Gila River Indian Community, which operates three casinos of its own, spent nearly \$2.6 million, in part to maintain a restriction that could block the Tohono casino.

Among tribes nationwide, the two easily spent the most on casino lobbying, according to an analysis by the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan watchdog. The Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, which operates two casinos and opposes a competitor near Glendale, also spent \$275,000 lobbying, in part, on gaming issues last year.

"Obviously, the Nation would rather not have to spend these funds on lobbying efforts, as there are many pressing needs confronting our community," the Tohono tribe said in a statement.

"Despite being greatly outspent, the Nation is committed to fighting for its rights under the law, and we are committed to creating thousands of jobs and hundreds of millions of dollars in new economic impacts for the West Valley."

A spokesperson for the Gila River tribe could not be reached for comment Monday.

The proposed casino has been in dispute since the Tohono tribe first signaled it intended to use annexed land for gaming. That decision was upheld in 2010 by the U.S. Interior Department but has drawn lawsuits and proposed legislation on Capitol Hill since then.

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Last year, the Tohono tribe was primarily interested in a House bill it opposed that would have effectively blocked its efforts to conduct gaming activities on 54 acres it owns near Glendale. The bill easily passed the House in June but languished in the Senate. It was sponsored by U.S. Rep. Trent Franks, R-Ariz., and supported by other House Republicans from Arizona. U.S. Rep. Ed Pastor, D-Ariz., voted for it but his two Democratic colleagues from Arizona voted against it.

With the beginning of a new Congress, the House would have to consider a new bill for the measure to become law.

In contrast to the tribes' lobbying efforts on the issue, Glendale spent \$70,000 lobbying Washington last year.

And "only a tiny percentage of that was spent on that issue," said Craig Tindall, Glendale's city attorney. Even so, he said the city's efforts to stop the casino are bolstered by supportive members of Congress, as well as the state of Arizona and other tribes.

"This isn't just a city fight," he said.

In September, a federal appeals court upheld the Interior Department's decision. Tindall said the city is asking the entire appeals court to reconsider.

While the tribes led Arizona in lobby spending on Capitol Hill, other residents and groups spent at least \$11 million more on other issues.

The Safari Club International, a Tucson non-profit that advocates for hunters' rights, spent \$530,000, the next highest amount from Arizona. Its issues included urging the importation of polar-bear trophies from Canada and a bill to exclude the gray wolf from the Endangered Species Act.

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TriWest Healthcare Alliance, a Phoenix insurance-management company, spent \$514,000 as it tried to overturn a Pentagon decision in March to award a \$20 billion contract to manage government health benefits in 21 Western states.

Defense contractor Raytheon poured \$390,000 into lobbying for Arizona-related matters, records show. It listed developmental-weapons systems among its concerns.

Arizona's universities were also busy making appeals in Washington, often for grant-related issues.

Arizona State University spent \$310,000 in 2012, records show. That was up from \$210,000 the year before.

Northern Arizona University wasn't far behind with \$280,000 in lobbying expenses, which was down from \$330,000 in 2011.

The University of Arizona spent just \$100,000, though its affiliated foundation and health network spent another \$240,000 in 2012, records show.

The Apollo Group, which is the parent company of several for-profit college systems, including the University of Phoenix, spent \$300,000 lobbying last year. Its interests included prohibitions against incentive compensation in higher education, the controversial practice of tying college recruiters' pay, in part, to enrollment gains.

Phoenix spent at least \$306,000 for lobbying, records show. The city's interests included airport and housing issues.

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