

Wisconsin tribes divided over proposal for new casino

Written by Administrator

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MADISON, Wis.—Menominee Nation leaders have been pushing for an off-reservation casino in Kenosha for more than 20 years, hoping it will help pull their people out of poverty. The tribe overcame initial federal opposition, the indictment of its developer and fierce opposition from a rival tribe to score a significant victory this month when the U.S. Department of the Interior finally approved the project. But the next step may be the toughest. The Menominee need Republican Gov. Scott Walker to sign off, and he has laid down conditions that are already creating rifts among Wisconsin's 11 tribes. Walker said his approval hinges on three things—the plan must have community support; there can be no net increase in gambling; and the 10 other tribes must agree. The second and third requirements seem designed to create conflict; in order for the Menominee to get their casino, they or another tribe may have to give up some existing gambling, making it difficult to achieve consensus. Richard Monette, a former chairman of the North Dakota-based Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa who is now a law professor specializing in tribal issues at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said Walker is improperly trying to pass the buck. "It has nothing to do with those other Indian tribes. It has to do with a decision by the state of Wisconsin. He's the leader of the state of Wisconsin and he should be capable of making the decision," Monette said. The Menominee reservation covers all of Menominee County, one of the most economically depressed areas in Wisconsin. Its unemployment rate last month was 16.7 percent, compared to 6.8 percent statewide. "I've lived on the Menominee reservation all my life, and I can tell you that our tribe's unmet needs are significant and very real," tribal Chairman Craig Corn said at a state Capitol news conference last week. The tribe operates two casinos in Keshena, the county seat. Their revenue is confidential, but the facilities are far smaller than the casinos run by the Ho-Chunk Nation and Forest County Potawatomi, who have the biggest—and presumably most lucrative—gambling operations in the state. The Menominee hope a casino in Kenosha, about 200 miles southeast of Keshena on the Wisconsin-Illinois border, would draw more customers from Milwaukee and Chicago and their densely populated suburbs, leading to higher profits. Kenosha County voters approved the idea in an advisory referendum in 2004. The project ran into snags, though. The tribe's developer was indicted for making illegal campaign contributions to then-President George W. Bush and then-Wisconsin Gov. Jim Doyle. Then the Bush administration announced the farther a tribal casino was from a reservation, the harder it would be to win federal approval. President Barack Obama's administration repealed that policy. The U.S. Department of the Interior gave the Menominee the go-ahead on Aug. 23. Walker responded by reiterating his criteria for approval. Still, the governor plans to hold a 60-day comment period on the casino. The Menominee are trying to make their case to the public, pointing to analyses they commissioned that show the casino would create 3,300 permanent jobs and provide \$35 million in annual payments to the state. They also point to the 2004 referendum as evidence of support. But that referendum was almost a decade ago, and gambling opponents, most notably a group called Enough Already! WI, have pushed back hard since the federal approval came down. It's also unclear what Walker means by no net gambling increase. His spokesman said the governor's position is in line with a separate referendum voters approved in 1993 to limit gambling. Corn said in an interview that he believed the referendum involved only state gambling expansion. But others think it could require the Menominee to give up gambling in Keshena or another tribe to sacrifice some of its machines. The other huge hurdle is tribal consensus. Walker told the Kenosha News he added that requirement to avoid feuding between tribal governments, but the call for no net gambling increase seems to be sparking tensions. Two Wisconsin bands looking to build their

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own off-reservation casinos—the Lac Du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians—have sided with the Menominee. "Everybody has the right to do gaming," Lac Du Flambeau President Tom Maulson said. "We shouldn't fight over our customers there. We're doing it for our people back home." The Potawatomi and Ho-Chunk Nation, however, remain steadfastly opposed to the plan. The Potawatomi, who fear a Kenosha casino would suck profits from their operation 40 miles north in Milwaukee, say the state can't support more gambling. Walker served as Milwaukee County executive before he became governor. "We hope that Governor Walker will see that this project is not in the best interest of Wisconsin and puts an end to the chaos created by the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs)," Potawatomi Attorney General Jeff Crawford said in a statement. The Menominee have offered the Potawatomi shares in the casino's development or management, but Crawford has called the offer a publicity stunt. The Ho-Chunk Nation, meanwhile, maintains the Kenosha area is part of its traditional homeland and the tribe would consider a Menominee casino there an incursion. Ho-Chunk President Jon Greendeer said he's told the Menominee as much. "It's a very awkward and uncomfortable discussion to have with people you consider your friends and allies in so many other interests," Greendeer said. "My biggest hope is none of these long-built alliances deteriorate because of this."

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