

Spokane County Commissioner Todd Mielke testified this week before a congressional subcommittee in favor of tightening regulations around the siting of off-reservation casinos such as the one sought by the Spokane Tribe in Airway Heights.

Mielke told the House Indian and Alaska Native Affairs Subcommittee on Thursday that local officials should have more say in the decision to allow off-reservation casinos. He opposes the proposed Spokane Tribe casino.

In a news release after the testimony, the Spokane Tribe charged that Mielke has longtime, close ties to other gambling interests.

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Written by Administrator

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Mielke said in an interview there are local issues involving taxes, land use, law enforcement, transportation and mental health services that are not adequately addressed under the current system for approving tribal casinos through the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs.

He told the subcommittee that the Bureau of Indian Affairs has moved from allowing off-reservation casinos under limited circumstances to a policy of wider approval as a de facto project proponent.

Despite vocal community opposition and concerns about encroachment to Fairchild Air Force Base, the bureau has not rejected the tribe's proposal for a casino on the north side of U.S. Highway 2 at Fairchild, Mielke told the committee.

"It is difficult to imagine an activity less consistent with the needs of a military base that trains tanker pilots in day and night operations than siting a brightly lit casino with thousands of visitors less than 1,000 feet beneath training approaches," Mielke said, according to a transcript of his comments.

"Spokane County's view is the process is broken."

Within hours of the hearing, the Spokane Tribe issued its statement that Mielke is trying to protect nontribal gambling interests, including card rooms and establishments offering pull tabs.

Before Mielke was elected to the county commission in 2004, he ran a consulting firm and had

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been a lobbyist for card rooms and bars and restaurants that offer pull tabs and other forms of gambling. He also served as a state lawmaker in the 1990s and is currently president of the Washington State Association of Counties.

After becoming a commissioner, he voted in favor of a reduction of the tax on nontribal gambling from 15 percent to 2 percent. He said he believed the higher tax put local establishments at a competitive disadvantage with tribal casinos.

The Spokane Tribe pointed out that the Kalispel Tribe, which operates Northern Quest Resort & Casino near Airway Heights, is a campaign contributor to Mielke and also opposes the Spokane Tribe's proposal.

Records show that the Kalispel Tribal Economic Authority gave Mielke \$900 toward his re-election campaign last year.

Mielke said he opposes the Spokane Tribe casino based on its detrimental effects on Fairchild and Spokane County.

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