

'State of the tribes' speech skirts issue of Kenosha casino

Written by Administrator

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Madison — The newly chosen leader of the Menominee Nation addressed state lawmakers Thursday with only a bank-shot reference to the biggest issue facing her tribe: a bid to open a casino in Kenosha.

Instead, Chairwoman Laurie Boivin focused in her "state of the tribes speech" on poverty, tribal mascots in public schools and the environment — issues of shared concern to all of the state's 11 federally recognized tribes.

Boivin made only an oblique reference to the \$800 million casino project backed by the Seminole Tribe's Hard Rock Entertainment Inc. that has divided Wisconsin tribes. The Ho-Chunk and Potawatomi tribes, both of which have their own lucrative casinos, have opposed the Menominee proposal.

"Poverty and the resulting effects is a primary concern for our tribes," Boivin said, coming as close as she did in the 47-minute speech to the issue. "While Indian gaming has led a few tribes out of poverty, many of our nations continue to struggle with varying degrees of poverty."

The speech, given each year by the top elected leader of a different tribe, has traditionally sought to avoid bitter controversy and present a united front among the state's tribes.

The casino also is hardly the only source of potential conflict. A proposed pit mine for iron ore in northern Wisconsin has drawn fierce opposition from the nearby Bad River band of Lake Superior Ojibwe, sometimes still referred to as Chippewa. Boivin didn't speak directly to that issue, emphasizing instead tribes' focus on the environment.

Boivin criticized a recent law approved by GOP lawmakers and Walker that makes it harder for the state to force local schools to drop Indian mascots. Those remarks drew standing ovations from Democrats and tribal leaders.

"It was our hope that we would have been able to work with legislators of both parties on finding a balanced approach. I believe there was a fairly balanced compromise offered, but it failed to get serious consideration. Our children should not be subjected to inaccurate representations of their cultural identity," she said.

Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald (R-Juneau) said the previous approach to dealing with mascots was unworkable and needed to change.

"It's a complex issue that I think America is struggling with," Fitzgerald said after the speech.

Difficult appearance

As Boivin took the podium to give her tribe's traditional greeting of "posoh," the unspoken issue of the casino hung over her. The leaders of the Potawatomi and Ho-Chunk tribes sat only a few feet away.

It was a challenging task for a chairwoman just chosen on Sunday by the Menominee legislature in its yearly leadership election. She defeated former tribal chairman Craig Corn, who had previously been the face of the tribe as it pushed for the project.

But Boivin more than knows her way around both tribal politics and gambling — she served as the general manager of her tribe's small casino in Keshena from 1989 to 1996 and served on the tribe's gaming authorities.

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Boivin also was a tribal legislator from 2003 to 2012, including one year as chairwoman.

Gary Besaw, who will continue serving as chairman of the tribe's Kenosha Gaming Commission, said the project would "continue without a hiccup."

Ho-Chunk President Jon Greendeer reiterated his tribe's opposition to the tribal casino but praised Boivin's speech.

"She was able to drive home some very important issues in Indian country but with tact and dignity," he said.

The Forest County Potawatomi tribe, whose Milwaukee casino is just down the interstate from Kenosha, agrees with the Menominee on "nine out of 10" issues before them, lobbyist and spokesman Ken Walsh said.

But the Potawatomi aren't dropping their opposition to a casino that "is still going to send hundreds of millions of dollars" to the Florida-based Seminole tribe, he said.

In an earlier effort to open an off-reservation Kenosha casino, Boivin was on the Gaming Commission that reviewed Morgan Murphy Jr.'s application to be a major investor in the company that was the driving force behind that failed attempt. Murphy's application was approved by the commission in 2000, despite disclosures that the former Chicago congressman had ties to organized crime figures, records show.

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The tribe withdrew that application in 2001 after it became embroiled in a bitter dispute with Murphy and the other investors.

Regulators also were raising numerous issues about that casino bid.

Boivin said Murphy isn't involved in the current project.

"What I recall from more than 13 years ago is that we ultimately found Morgan Murphy unsuitable," Boivin said.

Rep. Samantha Kerkman (R-Powers Lake), a casino backer, said she had seen Corn as recently as Friday and was surprised when he lost the election two days later. But she said she was pleased by Boivin's speech.

Menominee County, home of the tribe's reservation, is one of the poorest counties in the state. Boivin put tribal unemployment at 16.8%.

The Menominee have sought federal and state approval for the off-reservation casino in Kenosha since the 1990s. The U.S. Department of Interior approved the proposal in August, and then in October Hard Rock announced its involvement.

Gov. Scott Walker, who is up for re-election this fall, has unilateral power to approve or veto the proposal. The governor initially said he would decide the issue by October of last year, though the administration has since said a decision will not be made for several months and may not come until after the November election.

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Jason Stein reported for this story in Madison and Cary Spivak in Milwaukee.

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