

Tribe Hoping for Reservation to Build Casino

Written by Administrator

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An Indian tribe seeking to build a resort casino in southeastern Massachusetts is hoping a critical decision on its tribal reservation application is imminent.

The Mashpee Wampanoag tribe, whose ancestors negotiated peace with the Pilgrims, suggests a U.S. District Court ruling from earlier this month bodes well for its chances.

Tribal Council Chairman Cedric Cromwell says the Dec. 12 opinion, dealing with the Cowlitz tribe in Washington state, "gives hope to tribes throughout all Indian country" seeking to regain control of tribal lands.

He said the ruling affirms that the federal government can take land into trust for tribes that were "under federal jurisdiction" in 1934, but not necessarily federally recognized.

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The tribe, which won federal recognition in 2007 after a 30-year quest, has proposed a \$500 million casino in an industrial park in Taunton.

It has submitted an application to the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs to designate about 150 acres in Taunton and about 170 acres in the Cape Cod town of Mashpee as its tribal reservation.

Nedra Darling, a spokeswoman for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, says the agency is still reviewing the Mashpee's application, which was initially filed in 2012. "There is no specific time frame for a decision at this time," she said.

Alan Meister, an economist and author of the annual Indian Gaming Industry Report, said he's unsure of the Mashpee tribe's prospects, but notes that the Obama administration has approved land in trust gaming applications at a slightly greater rate than prior administrations.

Clyde Barrow, a University of Texas-Pan American professor and casino gambling expert, said among the questions federal authorities must weigh is whether the tribe has ancestral and contemporary ties to the Taunton land and whether the Mashpee were under federal jurisdiction by 1934, the year Congress passed the Indian Reorganization Act.

The tribe has said Taunton and the region that surrounds it are historically and culturally significant. A majority of the tribe's 2,600 members live outside the town of Mashpee. Many are in the Fall River-New Bedford region.

The fate of the Mashpee casino plan is central to the southeast region's casino gambling

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landscape.

State regulators have licensed a slot parlor for the Plainridge harness racing track in Plainville that hopes to open next year. They are also authorized to license one resort casino for the region but have been delaying the process, in part, because of the uncertainty with the tribe's plans. Initial applications are now due Jan. 30.

A tribal casino on a federal reservation would not require state approval. The Mashpee have reached revenue sharing agreements with state and local governments.

State regulators also have awarded Wynn Resorts a casino license for its \$1.6 billion Everett project outside Boston and MGM Resorts International a license for its \$800 million casino in the western Massachusetts city of Springfield. Those two facilities are hoping to break ground in 2015.

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