FLORIDA (WITI) — Governor Scott Walker made perhaps the biggest single economic decision of his tenure when he rejected the $800 million Kenosha casino proposal, and with it, 10,000 jobs. Walker says the decision saved the state millions of dollars and now, the chairwoman of the Menominee Tribe is giving her first and only interview on the subject. This, as FOX6’s Mike Lowe talks with the Hard Rock International CEO in Florida.

The Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Hollywood, Florida is a sprawling complex similar to the one that would have been built in Kenosha.

“It’s an amazing facility, over 100 acres, and it really is designed not just to have, say a Hard Rock cafe or the casino, but multiple amenities and attractions,” said Jim Allen, CEO of Hard Rock International.

To make that dream a reality — Allen and Hard Rock partnered with Wisconsin’s Menominee Indian Tribe on a plan to build a casino/hotel in Kenosha. The project included everything from a casino, to a concert hall — from restaurants to retail shops — all wrapped in rock and roll memorabilia.

“We’re like a bank. We’re a hotel. We’re a spa. We’re in the restaurant business. We’re in the pool business. We`re in the retail business. We’re in so many different businesses, so to have all of those under one umbrella, because of the additional revenue you can have from the gaming product, makes it really a destination in itself,” Allen said.

The proposal was opposed by the powerful Potawatomi Tribe in Milwaukee, who feared a new casino just 35 miles away would take business and jobs from Milwaukee. Groups opposed to the Kenosha casino launched ad campaigns designed to sway the public debate. Still, Hard Rock International spent $6 million on architectural plans, real-estate options in Kenosha, and other preparations.

That bet came with big promises: an$ 800 million economic development, and 10,000 jobs.

But it wasn`t in the cards.

“I have informed the federal government’s Bureau of Indian Affairs that I am not approving the application for a casino in Kenosha. I cannot put the taxpayers of this state on the hook of losing about $100 million or more now and potentially even more in the future,” Governor Walker said in a surprise announcement that came three weeks before the federal deadline.

According to a report on the decision issued by walker’s secretary of administration, the state could have lost out on payments: “if the proposed Kenosha casino is approved, the Potawatomi will likely withhold future revenue-sharing payments and seek a refund of all past lump sum and revenue-sharing payments.”

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Walker put the blame squarely on his predecessor, former Governor Jim Doyle, who had signed a compact with the Potawatomi a decade ago.

“In the end, what it really boils down to is there are more than 100 million reasons we had to make this decision, and they all fall firmly on the lap of Governor Jim Doyle,” Governor Walker said.

And with that, the dream was dead.

The news landed like a meteor on the Menominee reservation in Keshena and in the city of Kenosha, where Eric Olson spent years working on the project.

“Just gone, with basically, the wipe of a pen, and it’s all gone for these people,” Olson said.

If one building could tell the story of Kenosha’s hope and heartbreak over the failed casino, it would be the Dairyland Greyhound Track. Now it is a symbol of how some in Kenosha feel: abandoned and empty.

“It’s nothing. It’s an empty shell. The plan was to come and build a Casino here,” Olson said.

Olson knows all too well the Kenosha-Racine region has struggled with some of the state’s highest unemployment rates. In the just the last five years, Kenosha’s dog track closed, its manufacturing base eroded, and its cherished Chrysler plant disappeared.

“It’s gone. It’s gone. Mack White’s gone. American Brass is gone. Alpha Lovell. These were all family-sustaining jobs that are gone. Now, it’s mainly warehouses,” Olson said.

The biggest project to come to Kenosha was indeed a warehouse — the one million square foot Amazon Fulfillment Center. But Kenosha Mayor Keith Bosman’s plan for the city’s future was connected to the casino.

“It’s certainly detrimental for all of southeastern Wisconsin,” Mayor Bosman said.

The Kenosha Gaming Commission estimated that Hard Rock would have spent $85 million a year in Racine, Walworth and Kenosha counties buying goods and services for the casino.

“The entertainment complex, 400-room hotel, conference center that we lack right now, all these jobs, people who are unemployed or underemployed, that’s all gone now.” Mayor Bosman said.

Few have been more emotionally invested in this project than Menominee Tribal Chairwoman Laurie Boivin.

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t (cry) for days. I mean, I had to stop reading emails. It kind of felt like someone went in a ripped the heart out. How I would characterize this? Everybody lost in this,” Boivin said.

FOX6’s Mike Lowe also met with Menominee Tribal Legislator Gary Besaw on the reservation, 45 miles north of Green Bay — where the natural beauty of the place hides an ugly reality.

“It’s not a good thing to go on air and keep regurgitating the terrible health and social indicators of our tribe,” Besaw said.

A University of Wisconsin Medical School report shows the Menominee Tribe ranks last in overall quality of health, has the highest mortality rate, the highest obesity rate, the highest unemployment rate, the highest number of children living in poverty, the highest violent crime rate, and the highest number of single-parent households in Wisconsin.

The 9,000 members of the Menominee Tribe bet on the casino project as the last best hope to lift themselves out of poverty.

“Try to address all of those social issues that you just, that we do know so well — that was what the goal was. I believe the real facts were not looked at and a huge injustice was done. It’s a near fatal blow,” Boivin said.

Seventy-two hours prior to the Governor’s decision, the Menominee Tribe agreed to cover losses at Potawatomi’s casino. Hard Rock International also agreed to post a $250 million bond to cover the state’s future losses.

None of that mattered to Governor Walker.

Walker’s critics say something else played a role in his decision: presidential politics. An influential group of conservative voters in Iowa sent a letter to Walker, along with a petition

signed by 600 Republicans, saying: “As you are contemplating a presidential bid, I sincerely hope you will consider a ‘No Expanding Gaming’ policy.”

“I look at it as, for every evangelical Christian out in Iowa — which is not the state he’s governor of — for every one of those, there’s 15 people on that reservation who you just demoted to a lifetime of poverty,” Olson said.

Walker appeared at a presidential contenders forum the day after he announced his decision.

“Then to fly off to Iowa the next day, and to let a presidential bid influence what happens in the state of Wisconsin — — I don’t have a word to describe what that really is,” Boivin said.

Walker denies presidential aspirations guided his decision.

“If that’s the case, I would have shut it down right off the bat. If it were political reasons, I would have done it a long time ago. The bottom line is, I said all throughout this process, I wasn’t going to make this decision based on politics,” Governor Walker said.

Leaders of the Menominee Tribe and the city of Kenosha promise to keep fighting for the project. They have the support of a bipartisan group of state lawmakers who just days ago held a news conference in Madison imploring the Governor to reconsider his decision.

Governor Walker says he’s not changing his mind.

In Florida, casino critics say Governor Walker made a good move.

“Casinos are economic development like eating a quart of ice cream is dinner,” Paul Seago, Executive Director of “No Casinos” said.

Seago says you only have to look outside Hard Rock’s Hotel & Casino in Florida to see that the promises of economic development are empty.

“Local businesses around it can’t survive. Restaurants, hotels can’t survive when the casino can give away those things as loss leaders to bring you in,” Seago said.

Porn stores and pawn shops surround the Florida casino.

“I’m sure in Wisconsin, they keep the same stats, and find the same thing,” Seago said.

Hard Rock CEO Jim Allen argues the casino has made a difference in Florida and would have made a difference in Wisconsin.

“I think we respect that there are different points of view when it comes to gaming, but there is no doubt that the lion’s share of the money — upwards of 75-80% is going to do directly to the Menominee Tribe,” Allen said.

Hard Rock is still committed to working with the Menominee Tribe, but it’s also clear other would-be casinos may just take their business across the border.

“We tried to make it work, but in the end we’re at a point where it doesn’t, so we need to move forward,” Governor Walker said.

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