

Martha's Vineyard Tribe Voting on Controversial Casino Plan

Written by Administrator
Sunday, 16 August 2015 11:03 -

A Native American tribe is voting Sunday on a plan to turn an unfinished community center on Martha's Vineyard into a gambling hall, an issue that's divided tribe members, sparked a federal lawsuit and generated tensions with fellow residents of the famous resort island.

The Aquinnah Wampanoag want to offer up to 300 electronic, bingo-style games in the wood-shingled community center, which is located on tribal land on the island's western side. The tribe is not proposing to offer casino table games like blackjack or roulette.

The voting comes as the state, town and a local community association have sued to block the project, arguing that a 1983 agreement granting the tribe nearly 500 acres on the island specifically prohibits gambling.

The tribe maintains it is within its rights as a federally-recognized tribe to conduct limited gambling on tribal lands. A federal judge heard arguments in the case Wednesday and will rule later.

Tensions between town and tribe governments escalated earlier this summer when the tribe transferred control of the building to its casino corporation and began doing work on the site. The town successfully won a court order halting the work, pending a ruling in the lawsuit.

The casino debate has also roiled the tribe's roughly 1,200 members.

Some of the most vocal opposition comes from the island-dwelling minority, who represent roughly 15 percent of the tribe's membership. A number are concerned about traffic, crime and other social problems a casino could bring.

"This is going to drastically affect our way of life," says Jason Widdiss, who lives with his wife and four children in tribal housing near the proposed casino site. "Literally, this casino would be at the end of my road."

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Supporters counter that casino revenues, which tribal leaders have suggested could be as much as \$4.5 million a year, will allow their government to offer more critical services where the majority of its citizens live — off island.

Cheryl Andrews-Maltais, chairwoman of the tribe's gambling corporation, says she's frustrated opponents continue to fight the plan, noting that tribe members have voted in favor of it a number of times in recent years, including a narrow vote last year.

"We've already been through this," she said. "This is the only way that we feel we can close the gap between the haves and the have-nots. It's time for folks to begin looking at our resources as shared resources."

Bettina [Washington](#), the tribe's historic preservation officer and a Boston-area resident, says she's personally opposed to gambling but doesn't like the idea of a federal judge deciding whether the tribe can open a casino, either.

"This is not what I picture us doing," she says. "However, I'll defend our right to game. It's our decision whether we are going to game or not."

Tribal Chairman Tobias Vanderhoop stressed Sunday's vote is focused on the community center proposal — not whether the tribe should pursue gambling opportunities at all.

"That's a different question," he said, declining to provide the exact wording of Sunday's referendum, which members said is typically not disclosed until the day of the vote.

Vanderhoop would also not rule out presenting a casino question to the tribe again if members reject the current casino plan. Under tribal law, referendums can be posed annually.

"Gaming would continue to remain on the table," he said. "It would just have to take another form."

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