

Connecticut tribes delay choosing casino site

Written by Administrator
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Officials say it's unlikely a location will be nailed down in time for the next regular legislative session.

HARTFORD, Conn. — Connecticut's two federally recognized Native American tribes say a site may not be chosen for their proposed casino near the Massachusetts border until later in 2016 than anticipated.

The Mashantucket Pequot and Mohegan tribes originally planned to announce a site by Dec. 15 and have a proposal ready for the General Assembly to consider when lawmakers return to the state Capitol in February. Then they suggested it might be before the session begins.

Andrew Doba, a spokesman for the tribe's MMCT Venture, said Wednesday the tribal entity was still reviewing the proposed locations in Windsor Locks, East Windsor, East Hartford and Hartford, and local approvals have not been completed.

"We are still conducting our due diligence and will make the necessary decisions once that process is complete," he said, adding how the tribes still intend to open a facility before MGM Resorts opens its planned \$950 million casino in Springfield, Massachusetts, in the fall of 2018.

The expected delay comes as MGM appears to be ramping up its political presence in Connecticut.

The Mashantucket Pequot and Mohegan tribal chairmen told The Hartford Courant's editorial board on Tuesday it was unlikely a location for the facility will be chosen in time for the next regular legislative session. However, the tribes are expected to seek some sort of legislation. Doba said "there are many factors to consider as we move through this process, not the least of which is making sure that we secure the hundreds of millions of dollars the state gets every year from casino slot revenue."

The two tribes currently have a revenue-sharing agreement with Connecticut in return for

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exclusive casino gambling rights in the state. Some state legislators have raised concerns that a third jointly run tribal casino, as proposed by MMCT Venture, might adversely affect that agreement.

Senate Majority Leader Bob Duff, D-Norwalk, a proponent of the proposed casino project, said the tribes have not told him what legislation may be needed next session. He sees the proposed third casino as key to protecting jobs at the tribes' Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods Resort Casinos in southeastern Connecticut and was unconcerned by the potential delay.

"First, we have to figure out if there's a community that wants this joint venture. If so, then we have to work through those issues that have been raised, which I'm confident that we can do," he said. "It's really one step at a time. You want to get this right and not rush into something and get it wrong."

A message was left seeking comment with MGM, which is challenging Connecticut's process in court.

State records filed with the Office of State Ethics show MGM hired the public affairs firm Global Strategy Group in November. It lists Roy Occhiogrosso, a former top adviser to Democratic Gov. Dannel P. Malloy, as one of three lobbyists registered to represent MGM in the next session. The document shows MGM expects to pay the firm \$62,000, including sales taxes and expenses, for grassroots work.

Records also show MGM planned to spend another \$35,000 with Global Strategy Group between Nov. 9 and Dec. 31 for other work.

Meanwhile, documents show MGM has again hired Hartford lobbying firm Sullivan & LeShane Inc. for the upcoming legislative session, anticipating it will pay the firm \$150,000 plus \$45,000 in sales taxes and reimbursement for expenses.

Doba, who represents the tribal venture, is a former communications director for Malloy.

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