

## Casino plan 'slowly clearing the hurdles,' Bernero says

Written by Administrator

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The proposed Kewadin Lansing Casino could create 1,500 permanent jobs in the city. Mayor Virg Bernero said Wednesday the project is "slowly clearing the hurdles" required so it can eventually come to fruition. (Photo: Courtesy photo)

LANSING -- No matter how long it takes to settle court disputes and receive approvals, an Upper Peninsula American Indian tribe appears committed to building a \$245 million, 125,000-square-foot downtown casino which already has Mayor Virg Bernero's support.

The Sault St. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians filed an application two years ago with the U.S. Department of Interior to have the proposed casino site adjacent to the Lansing Center taken into trust. A decision could be made "within the next few weeks," said John Wernet, the tribe's lawyer.

"We're optimistic that it will be in our favor," Wernet said Wednesday. "At this point, we'd be pleased just to have a decision."

Telephone messages left Wednesday morning with Department of Interior spokeswoman Nedra Darling to determine the tribe's application status weren't returned. Whether federal officials approve the application is one of several challenges the Sault St. Marie tribe faces.

Two Michigan Indian tribes, the Saginaw Chippewa and Nottawaseppi Huron Band of Potawatomi, oppose the Sault St. Marie tribe's plan because they claim the proposal violates the 1997 Michigan Indian Land Claims Settlement Act. The opposing tribes argue the Sault St. Marie tribe doesn't have the right to build on the land needed for the project.

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James Nye, a spokesman for the opposing tribes, said Wednesday the tribes are monitoring the Department of Interior's review of the Sault St. Marie tribe's application closely. Nye added that he anticipates the losing side of the decision to challenge it in federal court. Nye said he doesn't put much stock in Bernero's support of the casino plan.

"Listening to him, there was supposed to be a casino two years ago," Nye said.

The Saginaw Chippewa tribe owns Soaring Eagle Casino & Resort in Mount Pleasant; the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of Potawatomi owns FireKeepers Casino Hotel in Battle Creek.

Wernet said the land needed for the casino in Lansing could be purchased by the Sault St. Marie tribe from the city this year -- if the tribe gets the application approved. Wernet, however, added that he anticipates court appeals filed by the opposing tribes' lawyers if federal officials rule in favor of the project.

"We're really anxious to get going," Wernet said.

On Wednesday, Bernero told the LSJ he feels "very good" about the decision the Department of Interior will make. Bernero added that he believes it's imperative for the city and Sault St. Marie tribe to receive a decision from the federal government as President Barack Obama's administration winds down. If the Department of Interior rules in the Sault St. Marie tribe's favor, Bernero said he believes opposing tribes will have a tougher time stopping the project from moving forward.

Last fall, a federal judge blocked an attempted by Attorney General Bill Schuette to prevent the Sault St. Marie tribe from building the casino. The judge ruled the tribe did not violate any law when it submitted the trust application to federal officials.

"We're slowly clearing the hurdles," Bernero said. "We're committed to walking the long road."

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Bernero said last year he expects the casino to create 1,500 permanent jobs, 700 construction jobs and funding for the Lansing Promise college scholarship program.

Under the casino proposal, the facility's annual revenue payments to Lansing would help fund four-year college scholarships for Lansing School District graduates. In 2012, the city estimated the casino would generate about \$6 million or more a year in revenue sharing.

The current Lansing Promise program gives scholarships equivalent to an associate's degree (up to 60 credits) at Lansing Community College or \$5,000 at Michigan State University.

Plans for the casino, at Michigan Avenue and Cedar Street on property adjacent to the Lansing Center, call for up to 3,000 slot machines, 48 table games and several bars and restaurants. The project also calls for two parking decks with about 2,900 spaces.

Nye, the opposing tribes' spokesman, said supporters of the casino should be skeptical of all the incentives the Sault St. Marie tribe pitches for Lansing.

"The benefits that are being discussed are really nothing more than promises," Nye said.

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