

Wisconsin tribes clash in casino expansion fight

Written by Administrator

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At 85, Betty Putnam-Schiel has trouble standing, but she gets along well enough in her home on the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans' northern [Wisconsin](#) reservation thanks to tribal assistants who do everything from shovel her snow to change her lightbulbs.

But maybe not for much longer. Another tribe, the Ho-Chunk Nation, is expanding its nearby casino into a full-fledged resort that would rival the Stockbridge-Munsee's own casino, threatening the gambling revenue that supports services like Putnam-Schiel's helpers.

The Ho-Chunk say they're simply trying to provide for their own people. The increasingly bitter quarrel illustrates how tribes across the country are clashing as they battle for gambling revenue in an ever-tightening market.

"It's unfair," Putnam-Schiel said of the Ho-Chunk expansion. "I count on the help from the casino money. It's survival for a lot of us."

According to the National Indian Gambling Commission, 240 tribes offered gambling in 28 states as of January. With casinos restricted to reservations and land held in federal trust, tribes have been left to beef up their existing facilities to grow revenue rather than expand into new territories. That means more tribes have found themselves in direct competition with their neighbors, said Steve Light, co-director of the Institute for the Study of Tribal Gambling Law and Policy at the University of North Dakota.

Intertribal disputes over casinos have happened in Connecticut, California and Michigan in the past five years. Just two years ago, Wisconsin Gov. [Scott Walker](#) refused to give the Menominee Nation permission to build a second casino on trust land in Kenosha after the Potawatomi and Ho-Chunk complained about competition — just as the Stockbridge-Munsee are now.

The current dispute looks like a classic David vs. Goliath fight.

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The 7,000-member Ho-Chunk Nation has no true reservation. The federal government moved the tribe from Wisconsin to Nebraska in the 1830s; members who returned to Wisconsin in the 1870s received or purchased homesteads. As a result, the tribe has established six casinos on trust land around Wisconsin, including in Wisconsin Dells, the state's tourism center. They also have established office supply distribution centers, gas stations, an RV park and a theater.

The Stockbridge-Munsee, by comparison, have about 1,400 members. About a third live on a swampy, rural reservation in Shawano County, about 50 miles east of Green Bay. It's a hardscrabble existence; 21 percent of the American Indians in the county lived below the poverty line in 2015 and a drive through the reservation reveals aging, isolated homes linked by lonely two-lane roads.

The tribe runs a banquet hall, a golf course, an RV park and a gas station but depends almost entirely on revenue from its North Star casino. The money funds tribal health care and elder centers, elder chore assistants and the reservation's police and fire departments. The money also has paid for body cameras for county sheriff deputies, a police liaison officer and tutors in Shawano County schools and workers who help the county with road repairs, tribal President Shannon Holsey said.

But the Stockbridge-Munsee has always struggled with location. The reservation is about 10 miles from U.S. Highway 29, the main thoroughfare that crosses the state. Gamblers have to travel winding two-lane roads through a bog to reach the North Star.

The Ho-Chunk, meanwhile, have run a casino just off Highway 29 about 17 miles west of the North Star since 2008. Last year, the tribe began work to add hundreds more slot machines, a hotel and a restaurant to the site.

The Stockbridge-Munsee estimate the expansion will cost them \$22 million in lost gambling revenue as players choose the Ho-Chunk facility over the North Star. That could lead to job cuts and severely curtailed tribal services, the band's leaders say.

The Stockbridge-Munsee filed a federal lawsuit last week alleging the expansion violates the Ho-Chunk's gambling compact with the state, arguing the compact doesn't allow for such an extensive expansion. They also contend that Walker has breached the Stockbridge-Munsee's

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own compact, which calls for the state to protect the tribe from competition. And they dispute that the Ho-Chunk land was properly taken into trust to allow gambling in the first place.

"We're not just going to roll over," Holsey said. "This is our home."

Walker administration officials wrote to the Stockbridge in January that they were satisfied that the Ho-Chunk expansion was legal, citing a 2003 amendment to the Ho-Chunk compact and an earlier [Bureau of Indian Affairs](#) determination on the trust issue.

Ho-Chunk leaders responded to the Stockbridge lawsuit by calling their arguments frivolous, weak and trivial.

"The only issue here is dealing with competition," Ho-Chunk spokesman Collin Price said in a telephone interview. "The tribes own businesses. These businesses provide resources and programs for tribal members. That's why it's so important to protect them and try to offer more."

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