

Muskegon County casino approval complicated by another tribe that calls it 'shameful'

Written by Administrator
Wednesday, 25 May 2022 15:49 -

Update: This story has been updated with comments from the leader of the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians.

MUSKEGON COUNTY, MI – Gov. Gretchen Whitmer wants to delay a decision on a Muskegon County casino until a federal decision is made on whether to recognize a different tribe that may want to open its own casino.

A decision on whether to federally recognize the Grand River Bands of Ottawa Indians is due by Oct. 12. If it does receive federal recognition, the tribe could open its own casino, according to Whitmer.

Whitmer is frustrated by [a June 16 federal deadline](#) to decide whether to approve the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians' proposal for an off-reservation casino near I-96 and U.S. 31 in Fruitport Township.

In a recent letter to a federal official, Whitmer sought an extension of her deadline, or an earlier decision on the Grand River Bands' recognition.

"Shameful" is how the Grand River Bands of Ottawa Indians termed the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians' plan to open a casino on property the Grand River Bands says is in its ancestral homeland.

The Grand River Bands has been seeking federal recognition, which the Little River Band already has, since 1994.

Meanwhile, the Little River Band has been seeking to open the Fruitport Township casino for the past 12 years, and already has received federal approval for it. The tribe currently operates a casino in Manistee.

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“I am deeply concerned and disappointed that another tribe is attempting to pressure the governor to give away some of our homelands in order to build an off-reservation casino on the treaty lands of our tribe,” Grand River Bands of Ottawa Indians Chairman Ron Yob said in a prepared statement. “This is morally wrong and unjust, and we call on Governor Whitmer to reject this cynical effort.”

Little River Band Ogema Larry Romanelli called Yob’s comments “unfortunate” and said the property the casino is planned on is “our homelands as well.” He said his tribe’s original reservation was in Muskegon County, 17 miles from the proposed casino site.

“We share heritage,” Romanelli said of the two tribes. “We share the same bloodlines.”

Whitmer clearly is unhappy with having to make a decision on the casino before the federal government decides if it will acknowledge the Grand River Bands of Ottawa Indians.

In a terse letter sent Monday, May, 23, Whitmer pressured U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland to decide on the tribe’s recognition before June 1 “so that I can take it into account” in determining the fate of the casino. Alternatively, she said her deadline should be extended.

“This is a problem of the (Department of Interior’s) making, and it is a problem that DOI must solve,” Whitmer wrote to Haaland.

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Romanelli said the issue of the Grand River Bands’ sovereignty and the Little River Band’s casino should not be tied together, and puts Whitmer “in a very awkward spot.”

“We wish them well,” Romanelli said of the Grand River Bands’ quest for officials acknowledgement from the federal government. “Their recognition has taken a long time.”

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The Grand River Bands of Ottawa Indians first sought federal recognition in 1994, and has been on the “active consideration list” since 2013, according to Yob. The recognition was needed to solidify its plans to open a casino near downtown Muskegon several miles west of the Fruitport Township site.

For decades, tribal leaders held out hope that a casino eventually would be developed on the “Harbor 31” site on Muskegon Lake. In 2014, city officials began to back off their endorsement of the plan, and ground recently was broken on [a \\$110 million mixed-use development](#) of the Harbor 31 property.

Yob praised Haaland for pushing the tribe’s petition for recognition “back on active consideration.” He also expressed “the greatest respect” for Whitmer.

“It is shameful that another tribe would seek to alienate our people from the lands of their ancestors,” Yob said. “I am hopeful that Governor Whitmer will preserve and protect the lands of the Grand River Bands for generations to come.”

Whitmer wrote to Haaland, the Grand River Bands “may wish to open their own gaming facility” not far from the Little River Band’s proposed casino site. She could “frustrate” those plans if she were to approve the Little River Band’s casino, Whitmer wrote.

The Little River Band’s plans for an off-site casino at the site of the former Great Lakes Downs horse racing facility has been in the works for more than 12 years. It is proposing a \$180 million development, including a 149,000 square-foot casino and 220-room hotel on the 60 acres in Fruitport Township.

Because it would be an off-reservation casino, it requires federal and state approval.

The Department of Interior gave its approval of the casino in December 2020, just prior to former President Donald Trump leaving office. That gave Whitmer a year to make her decision, but she later was able to get federal approval for a six-month extension.

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In her letter to Haaland, a President Joe Biden appointee, Whitmer complained that the deadline “forced” by the Trump administration was “unworkable” because of the pending issue of the Grand River Bands’ recognition.

She wrote that if a decision on tribal recognition isn’t made by June 1, her June 16 deadline should be extended until there is a decision.

The governor wrote “it is critical that we have this information available to enable us to weigh the various considerations and accurately assess the impact and consequences of this decision.”

While broad local support buoyed the Little River Band’s planned casino for the past 12 years, it has received pushback from other Michigan casinos that oppose off-reservation gaming.

The Detroit City Council and the Wayne County Board of Commissioners, where three state-licensed casinos operate, [issued resolutions last year](#) to disagree with off-reservation gaming efforts. They’re concerned approval of an off-reservation casino will lead to “an influx in casino gambling operations.”

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