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EDITORIALS

A Better Bet

Work out best state deal with new tribal casino

May 3, 2006

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Gov. Jennifer Granholm needs to intensify talks with a western Michigan tribe that is awaiting federal approval for its reservation land. The Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians, also known as the Gun Lake Tribe, has elaborate plans for a casino that will be ready to go as soon as Washington puts the requested acreage, off U.S. 131 near Wayland, into trust.

The holdup is a lawsuit filed in federal court in Washington, seeking to stop the land from being designated as a reservation. The last briefs in the case were filed Friday. Because this same court has ruled on a similar Michigan case -- and been upheld by the appeals court -- action could come sooner rather than later.

Based on that precedent, the Gun Lake Tribe will prevail. So unless the Granholm administration gets busy, the state will have no casino compact with the tribe even as it begins construction. Compacts traditionally give the state a cut of gambling receipts as well as governing common concerns of all state residents, such as the legal age for gambling. To protect everyone's interests, the administration has to bargain seriously with the tribe.

The group trying to stop the tribe in court, Michigan Gambling Opposition, wants to fend off what it fears will be an economic drain on Grand Rapids and social problems from having a casino so close. But rather than fighting the inevitable, the group might instead lean on Granholm to negotiate tribal funding for additional social services in Kent County.

The casino would be built in Allegan County, just over the Kent County line, between Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo. The tribe has little reason to acknowledge Kent County's concerns unless the county is part of a state deal.

The gambling opponents also are part of a federal push for a nationwide moratorium on any new tribal casinos based on the recent involvement of corrupt lobbyist Jack Abramoff in tribal issues at the federal level. The Gun Lake Tribe shouldn't be made a scapegoat in the Abramoff scandal. It was generally a victim of these underhanded dealings, as various forces ganged up on them to deter their proposed casino.

No one should welcome more gambling in Michigan. But tribes who play by the rules can't be arbitrarily shoved

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back down either. The governor needs to take the Gun Lake casino seriously and get the best deal she can for Michiganders.

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