



Allegan casino: time to deal

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When it comes to a proposed casino in Allegan County, the old country song applies: You've got to know when to hold 'em. And know when to fold 'em.

For Michigan, the time to fold will be when land is taken into trust by the federal government for the Gun Lake Tribe. That could happen very soon, depending on court action.

Once the land is in trust, a casino is all but inevitable, and lawmakers and the governor will be forced to deal with the tribe to garner revenue and exercise oversight at the planned Wayland Township complex.

For local governments, the revenue would offset expenses the casino would bring. The state, where budget decisions involve grim choices between competing evils, can't afford to forego funds.

Refusing to negotiate a compact, the contract between the tribe and the state, would be a considerable gamble, likely a losing one for Michigan. The U.S. Department of the Interior, the agency responsible for overseeing tribal gaming, has consistently sided with tribes, in at least one case allowing a casino without a compact.

When it comes to stopping American Indian casinos, there are few if any effective legal gambits. Federal law favors tribes. Much has been said in the Legislature against casinos. But the final solution to regaining some state control of American Indian gambling lies with Congress. Washington lawmakers should reopen the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, which granted considerable latitude to tribes to site casinos with little or no state input.

In the meantime, a Gun Lake casino is almost assuredly headed our way. Late last month, a U.S. District judge in Washington, D.C., dismissed a Grand Rapids-area group's suit against the Interior Department. Michigan Gambling Opposition plans to continue the fight. The history of such appeals offers scant comfort to anti-casino forces. Gov. Jennifer Granholm is willing to negotiate a compact once land is taken into trust. That's the responsible, pragmatic position. Two years ago, Wyoming's Northern Arapaho Tribe received permission from the Interior Department to operate a Class III casino -- which includes blackjack, slot machines and roulette -- with no compact and no cut of the proceeds. Michigan should not be caught in a similar spot.

A compact would give the state the power to inspect the casino to make sure it's compliant with the terms of the deal. Past agreements have required tribes to pay 8 percent of slot machine proceeds to the state and 2 percent to local governments.

The governor should not approve a compact without securing support from the Legislature. Many West Michigan lawmakers have opposed expanded gambling in Michigan, in part because of its social consequences. So has this paper. But now new alternatives may have to be considered and with legal appeals coming up short, we face a different reality, perhaps a Hobson's choice: take what we can through a compact, or risk getting nothing at all. Those aren't odds we should be willing to play.

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