

Time to deal

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A last-minute court injunction Monday delayed the final legal step necessary for an Allegan County Indian tribe to begin construction of a casino in Wayland. Nevertheless, the writing is on the wall for casino opponents: Federal law heavily favors Native American tribes on gambling issues, and it is almost inevitable that the Gun Lake Band of Pottawatomis will win permission to build a casino at the Bradley exit off U.S. 131. Given that inevitability, we believe it is now time for the state of Michigan to begin negotiations with the Gun Lake Band on an agreement that will give the state regulatory oversight over the casino and, along with local units of government, some share in the revenue it generates.

We have argued against the casino in the past. It's not what many people of West Michigan want and we are skeptical that it will generate the economic benefits that supporters claim. Historically, Indian casinos have enriched a few lucky tribes and their white investors, but almost no one else.

Our opinion hasn't changed, but we do recognize reality. It is tempting to call on Gov. Granholm to respect the local opposition and refuse to deal with the Gun Lake Band. (With 23 tribal and non-tribal casinos in operation or under construction, Michigan is already the gambling capital of the Midwest.) But that wouldn't stop a casino. Without a state agreement, called a compact, the Gun Lake Band could still open a limited gambling facility with so-called Class II games, such as bingo and the like. But the state wouldn't get any money and would be shut out of any auditing role. If a casino is to open, better that state regulators are there making sure that everything is on the up

and up and that the state shares in the proceeds. Typically in Michigan, tribal casinos pay 2 percent of the "net win" -- the total wagered on electronic games minus the winning payout -- to local units of government and 8 percent to the Michigan Strategic Fund. With the Gun Lake casino to be located so close to Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo and Holland, that share stands to be a big chunk of change.

Monday's injunction allows Michigan Gambling Opposition, the main group fighting the casino, to soldier on with its case before a federal appeals court in Washington, D.C. But no wagering man would put money on MichGO's case. The better venue for further action is Congress, which needs to overhaul the toothless Indian Gaming Regulatory Act to provide more serious federal oversight and a more active role for local communities in site decisions. When it comes to the Gun Lake casino, the best course of action for Michigan and for our local communities is to make a deal with the tribe. Click here to return to story:

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