

APR 28 2005

State should make a deal with the tribe

Despite all its bluster and grandstanding, it looks like the State Legislature and other local politicians are powerless to stop the Gun Lake Indian tribe from opening some kind of a casino.

The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs announced last week that the Gun Lake Band of Potawatomi's land they propose to use for a gaming center just west of Bradley will be placed in a trust. This virtually assures that a "class two" casino can be opened. If the tribe can work out a compact with the state, the facility then could be a more extensive "class three."

About 24 hours after the news of federal approval for the tribe's plan, Gov. Jennifer Granholm was reported on a news radio program to say she's ready to negotiate. Gov. John Engler, though he signed 11 other compacts for Indian casinos during his tenure, left this one for Granholm to decide, and she's finally indicated what she'll do.

The governor maintains that because the federal government has given its blessing, the state has no choice now but to try to get its best deal. Her logic makes sense. Whether or not you agree with a casino in the Gun Lake area now is irrelevant. It's coming regardless.

Our legislators are always talking about the new jobs we're going to get, accepting that Michigan will continue to lose traditional manufacturing jobs to the global marketplace. These new service positions are suppose to solve our jobs problems. Well, they're on the way. The casino says they will employ more than 2,000 people themselves and the casino's impact will provide many more jobs as they grow.

Yet the negative reaction to the federal government's move last week was suspiciously swift. Here at the Banner we first learned the news when we received commentary via overnight faxes from Congressmen Vern Ehlers and Peter Hoekstra, in which they told us their deeply held beliefs against the project. It was puzzling they could have taken pen in hand and written such serious scholarly analysis so quickly. Both rehashed the party line from the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce.

Closer to home, it was no secret that State Senators Patricia Birkholz and Ken Sikkema were very disappointed. They have consistently opposed a casino in these parts for a long time.

The media took too much stock in the Michigan Senate's move last December to rescind its approval of a compact, which many said was a terrible blow to the Gun Lake tribe. We weren't fooled, however. We knew back in December that if the feds approved, the state really couldn't do much to stop it, so we accused Birkholz, Sikkema and their comrades of simply grandstanding and playing to their base of political and economic support. We continue to stand by our assertion.

There are two interesting sides in this debate.

One is Grand Rapids vs. the rest of West Michigan. The Grand Rapids chamber opposes the casino because it might hurt downtown businesses and tourist attractions (like those run and planned by the houses of DeVos and VanAndel). Yet the chambers of commerce for Allegan County, Barry County and Kalamazoo welcome this project with enthusiasm.

The other is the moral issue that Birkholz likes to talk about, even though it smacks of hypocrisy. There are many conservative

Christians who say they oppose gambling, but many still participate in similar activities such as bingo, the lottery, raffles, office pools for the NCAA basketball tournament and even the stock market.

If the State Senate is seriously opposed to gambling, it should take immediate steps to make all forms of it illegal, including the state-run and state-promoted lottery. Then it should oppose any plan for people to take their social security contributions and instead invest them in the biggest gamble of them all — the stock market.

We grant that a new casino in our back yard will bring some challenges with it. Any time there is economic growth, there can be increased traffic, crime, pressure on local schools, etc. But growth has been showing itself to be knocking on our doors for some time, and because we cannot possibly stop it entirely, we must find ways to manage and control it.

Granholm's idea makes the most sense. The state can negotiate a compact and get its best deal, some sorely needed revenue for its depleted coffers. Or it can continue the bluster and grandstanding for the rich and powerful few.

There comes a time to give up a lost fight.