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Wayland Township Supervisor Roger Van Volkinburg anticipates "a much larger tax base to draw from" with the pending arrival of the Gun Lake Casino.

Allegan Angered By Casino Delays

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(Editor's note: This is the second installment of a series of stories examining the potential economic and public impact in the vicinity of the planned Gun Lake Casino.)

AAESA Intermediate School District Superintendent Ron Fuller anticipates a positive impact from the Gun Lake Casino's presence in the area.

DORR — The Allegan Area Educational Service Agency, formerly known as the Allegan Intermediate School District, is an unlikely advocate for the expansion of casino gambling into West Michigan. The organization, along with member districts Wayland, Hopkins and Allegan, have all publicly supported the Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomis' efforts to develop a tribal casino in Wayland Township.

"When you start talking to superintendents across the state, you find that every place a casino has gone in it's had a positive impact to local school districts," said AAESA Superintendent Ron Fuller. "That's why I'm here — for increased opportunities for kids in Allegan County."

Fuller is among a collection of stakeholders from Wayland-area community organizations and municipal governments that recently sat down with the Business Journal in Dorr to discuss the potential impacts of the Gun Lake Casino.

"Tribal casinos have really partnered with the surrounding school districts, and I think it's going to benefit all the kids we serve," Fuller said. "So I'm willing to stand up and speak to it."

As stipulated in Gov. Jennifer Granholm's Class III gaming compact with the tribe, pending approval by the state Senate, local governments will receive 2 percent of the casino's slot revenue. The Little River Casino Resort in Manistee had slot revenue of \$81 million in its first year of operation in 2000 and \$160 million the next. The Soaring Eagle Casino & Resort in Mt. Pleasant had slot revenues of \$255 million in the 12 months after its 1993 launch. Using a conservative estimate of \$150 million, Allegan County governments can expect contributions of at least \$3 million a year from the casino. That is \$300,000 more than the total per-pupil state funding for nearby Martin High School.

With its portion of the funding, Wayland Township is eyeing infrastructure investments. Roughly half of the roads in the county are unpaved, and large portions of the township, including the area immediately surrounding the casino site in Bradley, have no municipal water or sewer.

"We're probably looking at some big projects down the road," said Roger Van Volkinburg, Wayland Township supervisor. "And with the economic development, we're expecting a much larger tax base to draw from. It will bring in new jobs, new residents and new tax dollars."

As the nearest commercial corridor to Bradley, the city of Wayland is looking forward to the increased traffic and employment that the potentially \$250 million development will bring. The city has traditionally been a "bedroom community," explained Sheryl

Hamilton, a city trustee and co-chair of its downtown taskforce, with few residents who work in the community. With its estimated 1,800 employees, the casino could be a chance to bring back its daytime population and possibly feed traffic to its struggling downtown area.

“I don’t think we’re in a position to turn down jobs,” said Plainwell City Administrator Erik Wilson during a separate meeting with the Business Journal. Plainwell is the nearest commercially developed community to the south of Bradley.

“We’re not going to engage in any of the ethical discussions, but we certainly hope to capture the economic benefit from having a casino 10 minutes away.”

The Allegan County Sheriff’s Department will add an additional four deputies, a sergeant and associated equipment from a separate allocation arranged by the tribe with the county to cover any increased demand for public safety services in the Bradley area.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s a big-box store or a casino, any time you see any type of economic growth you see an additional burden on law enforcement,” said Lt. Frank Baker, who oversees police actions in the Wayland area. “There has been a lot of growth along the M-89 corridor (which runs through Plainwell, Otsego and into the city of Allegan), and the increased demand has been immediate. And when a big-box store comes in, we typically don’t see an increase in personnel until years later.”

The casino has been delayed for much of this decade by various opposition efforts, primarily a group of Grand Rapids businessmen and politicians aligned under the banner of the recently shuttered PAC 23 is Enough and prior to that the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce.

Initially, the casino plan was stalled by lengthy process delays publicly attributed to the lobbying efforts of 23 is Enough’s politicians and wealthy Grand Rapids Republicans, as well as those by competing gambling interests in Indiana and Mt. Pleasant. Currently, the Moline-based Michigan Gambling Opposition, or MichGo, is fighting the casino plan in federal court. That case is expected to be decided within the month. What should be the final hearings are scheduled for this Friday morning in Washington, D.C.

“What you have is the city in the state that is growing the most economically, Grand Rapids, attempting to tell its neighbor what’s good for them,” said Fuller, himself a Grand Rapids native.

There is palpable disdain for Grand Rapids and Kent County among leaders in rural Allegan County. This is not limited to the casino controversy, explained Jackie Straub, executive director of the Wayland Area Chamber of Commerce. As an example, when chamber representatives met with local development agency The Right Place Inc., the organization proposed a plan for regional collaboration with little to offer Allegan County.

“We were told that if we supported downtown Grand Rapids and its Medical Mile that we would see a trickle-down effect,” Straub said. “People like (Allegan-area State) Sen. (Patty) Birkholz are worried about us impacting Kent County. Well, Kent County could be impacting us in a positive way. But we’re not hearing anyone saying that instead of a casino they’ll build a research lab or a medical center.”

“There has never been an alternative option for what to do with our vacant buildings,” added Van Volkinburg, referring to the 147-acre Ampro facility that will eventually be converted into the casino. “The only person that came to the township was the tribe. If you’ve got a better idea for that property, if you’ve got a business that wants to move in there, then send them to me.”

Through its opposition of the casino, Kent County leaders are essentially questioning the judgment and competency of the Wayland-area municipalities and organizations that support it. Some, such as former 23 is Enough leader Peter Secchia, have explicitly said so.

“We are not blindly following the pied piper down the well because we’re not intelligent enough to do our homework,” Straub said. “Our confidence in this has not come lightly.”

The Kalamazoo, Wayland and Gun Lake chambers of commerce all commissioned research studies before agreeing to endorse the tribe’s efforts. The Allegan County Sheriff’s Department and the Deputy Sheriff’s Association of Michigan went so far as to contact the sheriff’s and fire departments of every community hosting a tribal casino in the state. **BJX**

Next Week: *The Gun Lake’ Indian Tribe’s connection to the region.*

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