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Casino friends, not foes

Wednesday, April 27, 2005

By Chris Knape

The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- Not every business in the River City is decrying the idea of a casino in Wayland Township.

A group of small business owners is speaking out in favor of the casino -- some seeing it as a boon, with others convinced it will boost local and state economies.

Their support flies in the face of high-profile opponents, including the Grand Rapids Area of Chamber of Commerce.

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Mark Schumaker, co-owner of Screen Ideas, 820 Monroe Ave. NW, sees the casino as a potential boon to his printing and embroidery business. He estimates the casino could mean up to \$500,000 in printing business.

Last year, he printed up a few sample ideas for the Gun Lake Band of Pottawatomi Indians, and took them down to show Chairman D.K. Sprague.

"The economy has been tough around here for the past four years and whenever there is a new prospect I call on them," Schumaker said.

Sprague's response chilled Schumaker.

"He said if Grand Rapids keeps fighting with us, Grand Rapids will not be

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getting any of their business," Schumaker said.

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Sprague declined an interview. However, tribal officials have made similar statements in the past.

Organizing other business owners to support the casino is a tougher job than he thought it would be, Schumaker said.

About half of the business people he talks to support -- or at least don't oppose -- the casino, he said. But only about half of those are willing to say so publicly because they fear retribution.

So far, he has a list of about 20 pro-casino businesses, although some are hesitant about publicly disclosing their names.

The Grand Rapids Chamber, a bevy of business leaders and most of the region's Republican political machine, is strongly opposed to the proposed casino in Wayland Township.

"There are some repercussions in Grand Rapids that could happen to their business by speaking out," Schumaker said.

The Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band says the casino will create 4,300 jobs in the community and generate millions of dollars in business for area suppliers.

However, opponents believe it will only benefit the area immediately around the casino, resulting in a net economic loss for Kent County and the state.

The Grand Rapids business community's opposition to the casino is centered around the political action committee 23 Is Enough. The name refers to the number of casinos already approved to operate in the state.

The 23 is Enough PAC is backed by former Perrigo Co. Chairman Michael Jandernoa, Universal Forest Products Chairman Peter Secchia, members of the DeVos and Van Andel families and a host of others in the Grand Rapids business community.

Schumaker's group supporting the casino includes Tom Tillman, owner of Tillman's Dining and Cocktails, 1245 Monroe Ave. NW.

The casino is inevitable, Tillman said, and won't hurt his business anymore than a hockey game at Van Andel Arena.

He believes he could set up a lucrative shuttle bus between Tillman's restaurant and the casino.

"I'm for the casino," he said. "I think it's going to bring jobs into the area."

A casino could also bring badly needed revenue to the state at a time when deficits are high, said Lawrence Marsh, the owner of Marsh & Associates, a distributor of commercial food processing equipment.

"My business, I don't think, is affected either way with the casino," Marsh said. "But I think the state should jump on any opportunities for revenues they can get as far as tax dollars."

The group Schumaker is putting together isn't the first in Grand Rapids to support the Gun Lake Band.

Last year, the Kent County Lodging Association endorsed the casino.

Other business groups backing the casino include chambers in Allegan, Barry County, Gun Lake, Wayland and Kalamazoo.

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