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Legislators criticize anti-casino campaign

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by: [Gale Courey Toensing](#) / Indian Country Today

BRADLEY, Mich. - Two state legislators have sharply criticized the anti-Indian casino group 23 Is Enough for using what they call racist materials in the group's campaign to stop the Gun Lake Tribe from opening its proposed casino.

In a parallel move, tribal leaders are asking Congress to withhold confirmation of 23 Is Enough attorney Robert Jonker, who has been nominated by President George Bush for a federal judgeship. Tribal leaders said Jonker's involvement in a group that uses racially charged materials raises "serious questions" about his suitability for the position.

Michigan state Rep. Mary Waters (D-Detroit) and state Sen. Mark Schauer (D-Battle Creek), wrote to 23 Is Enough, rebuking the anti-Native casino group for distributing an e-mail to an unknown number of recipients on July 27 that contained materials from the Web site of Frank Parlato Jr. of Niagara Falls, N.Y.

Parlato, a real estate dealer who refers to himself in the third person on his Web site, is a self-described "philosopher, yogi teacher, developer, journalist, activist, writer, musician, investor, ethnographer, publicist and scholar [who is] considered one of the leading authorities in the world on the life and teachings of Swami Vivekananda." Parlato has been a relentless opponent of the Seneca Nation of Indians.

In addition to his writings against the tribe, in which he uses quotations marks around the words Native American and sovereign nation to imply that the terms are somehow inaccurate or erroneous, Parlato's Web site includes a drawing depicting a Native as a crazed-looking "savage" holding up the scalp of a "white man" he has just attacked in front of the Seneca's casino with the caption, "Seneca servicing local patron at the Casino."

23 Is Enough and its sister group, MichGO, have filed suit against the U.S. Department of the Interior for its decision to put 147 acres of Wayland County land into trust for the tribe. The 300-member Gun Lake Tribe, whose official name is the Mash-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians, plans to build a casino and entertainment complex on the property.

The lawsuit is pending in the Washington, D.C., appellate court.

"While you have a right to oppose casinos, I implore you to stop using a racially intolerant person to carry your message," Schauer wrote to 23 Is Enough spokesman John Helmholdt on Aug. 11.

Schauer said he was "shocked" that 23 Is Enough would include Parlato in its activities after reviewing "extreme statements" attributed to Parlato in the media and on his Web site.

"Such racism does not further the public discourse and only services to promote bigotry and hatefulness," Schauer said.

In her Aug. 10 letter, Waters said the Parlato materials are "bigoted" and reminded the group that racial discrimination is illegal.

"Because federally recognized tribes have legal rights indelible to race and political identity, the very essence of 23 Is Enough's mission is founded in racial discrimination," Waters wrote.

"Racial intolerance has no place in American society. I was appalled to review the overtly racist Web site of the individual that 23 Is Enough cited in its e-mails. Your organization should be ashamed and should apologize to the Gun Lake Tribe immediately," Waters wrote, copying her letter to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the American Civil Liberties Union.

Confronted with the criticisms, Helmholdt was quick to apologize.

"Let me be very clear: 23 Is Enough absolutely denounces any form of racism or discrimination against any individual, whether a Native American, based on race, ethnicity, color or national origin. Had we been aware of it in advance we absolutely would not have used that information. From the very get-go 23 Is Enough is opposed to casino expansion. We do not oppose Gun Lake Tribe as Natives whatsoever. We simply believe Michigan has reached saturation point and it's time to say 'enough is enough' to casino expansion," Helmholdt said.

The group, however, agreed with Parlato's allegations about the negative effects of casinos, Helmholdt said.

"The points he made about the economic and social costs of casinos are consistent with the concerns we've raised all along," Helmholdt said.

Seneca Nation President Barry Snyder Sr. dismissed Parlato's comments as baseless.

"He will only stand on the sidelines and criticize, while we have moved forward, investing more than \$400 million to develop Seneca Niagara Casino and Hotel into a world-class attraction which employs more than 3,000 individuals and has generated millions of dollars in new revenue for the surrounding community," Snyder said.

Asked how 23 Is Enough can justify trying to stop Gun Lake from exercising its legal right to open a casino, Helmholdt said the group has never challenged the tribe's "rights for economic development."

"We're not denying their right as a federally recognized tribe. We're not challenging this issue. It's not about tribal or non-tribal gaming. It's about the expansion of casino gaming. This is not an issue with the Gun Lake tribe, it's an issue with their choice to seek a casino as a means to their economic ends," Helmholdt said.

Gun Lake Tribal Council Treasurer John Shagonaby said the tribe is now convinced that the anti-Indian casino group "will stop at nothing to advance its own agenda. Anyone associated with this group should be ashamed."

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That includes former President Gerald Ford and more than a dozen elected legislators - and raises a red flag on 23 Is Enough Attorney Robert Jonker of Grand Rapids, who also represented the anti-competition efforts of Boyd Gaming, a multibillion-dollar Las Vegas company that operated the Blue Chip Casino in nearby Indiana.

Jonker was nominated by Bush in June for the position of U.S. District Judge for the Western District of Michigan, to replace retiring Judge Gordon Quist.

"Robert Jonker's membership in a group that disseminates the views of an anti-Native American raises serious issues about his fitness to serve as a federal judge. Given his membership in 23 Is Enough, and his involvement in the Blue Chip Casino anti-competition efforts, serious questions should be raised by the U.S. Senate regarding Jonker's confirmation to federal judgeship," tribal spokesman James Nye said.

Jonker could not be reached for comment.

Gun Lake Tribal Chairman D.K. Sprague took a long-range view on 23 Is Enough's efforts.

"The tribe has endured centuries of intolerant views. Our ancestors persevered just as we have done today. Grand Rapids-based opposition has sought to deny our sovereign rights every step of the way, yet our project continues to move forward. At the end of the day our sovereign rights will prevail," Sprague said.