



KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Tribe's dreams hinge on casino

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A new casino near Wayland may hold the key to a local Indian tribe's dreams of establishing a home base and providing a prosperous future for its members.

The Gun Lake Band of Pottawatomis Indians' casino proposal is tied up in federal court, delayed while anti-gaming groups have pushed to limit new casinos in Michigan. The band owns land just off U.S. 131 north of Kalamazoo it wants to build on.

James Nye, a public-relations specialist and spokesman for the Gun Lake Band and a member of the Traverse City Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, has seen tribes' fortunes improve with the establishment of gaming.

His tribe runs two casinos in the northern part of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, and he attended Albion College on a scholarship funded by his tribe from gaming revenue.

"My tribe began Indian gambling in 1984. Literally in one generation our tribal membership has seen dramatic changes," Nye said.

Changes included new housing, health-care services, cultural education programs, college scholarships and expanded opportunities for employment. Similar improvements can be seen around the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Reservation, thanks to the \$400 million-per-year Soaring Eagle Casino and Resort in Isabella County.

The Gun Lake tribe is one of three seeking to open casinos in southwestern Michigan even as competition for gambling dollars has become fierce among the state's 20 casinos.

"Our tribal membership has seen what other tribes that have Indian gaming have been able to provide to their members," said John Shagonaby, CEO for tribal development and a member of the Gun Lake tribal council.

Encouraged by what other tribes have been able to do, the Gun Lake group polled its membership in 2000 and decided to go ahead with trying to win federal approval to build a casino, Shagonaby said.

In fact, he said, an important part of federal law allowing for Indian gaming requires that revenues from any tribal gaming enterprise be used only to fund tribal government operations or programs.

"Obviously we'd like to construct buildings for our tribal government," said Shagonaby, who works out of a rented office in a strip mall in Dorr.

The tribe also would like to bring its members home to its ancestral area and to provide land on which to build homes. It does not have reservation land.

Health care would be another priority from gambling revenue, he said.

"A high priority would be to bring a lot of positive energy to our tribe and to strengthen it and make our members more self-sufficient," he said.

The tribe traces its roots back to the 18th century, when it had villages on the Grand, Thornapple and Kalamazoo rivers. The Gun Lake tribe's primary village in 1820 was at the head of the Kalamazoo River.

According to a tribal history, the tribe avoided removal from Michigan by moving in 1840 to the Bradley area, where members were under the protection of a missionary.

After that, the tribe's membership scattered. But members gathered in the 1990s, renewed their relationships and applied for and won federal recognition as a tribe in 1999.

"I hope we can move forward in a reasonable time frame" to get final approval to open the tribe's gambling operation on 129th Avenue near U.S. 131, Shagonaby said.

"We'd like to build housing for our elders and to develop programs to preserve our tribal customs and history," he said.

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