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## Casino supporters pressing forward despite opposition

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WEST MICHIGAN — Although the Michigan Gambling Opposition (MichGo) has filed suit to try and stop the Gun Lake Band of Pottawatomi Indians from obtaining land to build a casino and restaurant complex in Allegan County, casino backers believe the law is on their side.

In May 2005 the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the U.S. Department of Interior approved the land-in-trust for the tribe. MichGo is challenging the bureau's finding of "no significant impact" and hopes to derail the tribe's proposed \$150 million casino in Bradley, between Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids.

"There's never been a successful suit that has prohibited tribes from taking land in trust. We believe these (MichGo actions) are nothing more than delay tactics," said Tom Shields, president of Lansing-based Marketing Resource Group, which is coordinating public relations efforts for the tribe. Shields and Jim Nye, special counsel on native and government affairs and consultant to Marketing Resource Group were speakers at a November meeting of Interchange, a Grand Rapids group of communications professionals.

"There's never been a tribal casino stopped anywhere in this country," Shields told the audience.

Shields, who has worked with Native American tribes in Michigan for 14 years, said a lot of time has been lost in the debate. "We're confident we're going to win. We're possibly only in the second period," Shields said.

Nye told the audience that the Gun Lake tribe's push for a casino has a legal foundation and its basis in sovereignty. Nye cited legal cases including a 1987 landmark decision California vs. Cabazon Band of Mission Indians when the Supreme Court ruled that states could not enforce any gaming laws or regulations on Indian reservations. After that case the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act was passed in 1988 giving states limiting power over tribal gaming.

Since the Gun Lake tribe does not yet have a tribal gaming compact with the state of Michigan as required, tribal supporters are using a two-pronged strategy. "Actually, the tribe is proceeding down both paths simultaneously to get the land in trust and get a tribal state gaming compact," Nye told

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IGRA requires that a state and a tribe negotiate to come to an agreement on the scope of the type of games the tribe will offer. The compacts spell out the percentage the tribe will pay to the state and the local governing unit, typically 8 percent and 2 percent respectively.

Shields said former Michigan governor John Engler recommended Gov. Jennifer Granholm seriously consider signing a compact with the Gun Lake tribe. That compact still awaits her signature. He noted 11 other tribes have gaming contracts with the state of Michigan.

MichGo President Todd Boorsma said his group is against the casino primarily because of the social implications — increased domestic violence, divorce and crime. He said MichGo collected 10,000 signatures early on when the group was founded several years ago.

“We’re challenging the finding of no significant impact. The Bureau of Indian Affairs really missed out. They didn’t address the social issues, the economic issues to other businesses and they missed on the traffic issue,” Boorsma told *MiBiz.*

Boorsma knows it could be a long, drawn out court case. Similar cases in Battle Creek and New Buffalo have been in the courts for more than six years and those affected tribes already have state gaming compacts in place.

The tribe’s plan for a casino in Allegan County has brought out supporters and naysayers in the affected communities as well as business groups who are for and against it, with both sides waving dueling economic studies.

23 is Enough, a political action committee made up of a group of prominent business and community leaders in West Michigan was formed in April 2004.

“23 is Enough is predominately focused on the negative economic impact on the West Michigan economy,” said 23 is Enough spokesperson John Helmholdt of Jones, Gavan & Helmholdt LLC. Helmholdt said an Anderson Group study released in 2003 never disputed the fact that Allegan County will see increased jobs and increased economic activity.

“Allegan County benefits at the expense of the surrounding counties,” Helmholdt told *MiBiz.* In a multiplier effect, for every job created in Allegan County, two jobs are lost from the surrounding counties. He said a casino that is untaxed and unregulated is unfair competition for other host industries such as restaurants, bars, hotels and theaters, and draws customers away from downtown entertainment districts.

“It is not a coincidence that the proposed Gun Lake casino is located directly between three metro areas (Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo and Holland),” Helmholdt said.

23 is Enough also believes IGRA needs to be reformed and the passing of Proposal 1 in the 2004 election shows there is a clear mandate to require voter approval for the expansion of casino-style gaming, although acknowledging that Proposal 1 applies only to commercial casinos and not tribal casinos.

23 is Enough Chair Mike Jandernoa, former CEO of Perrigo Co., told *MiBiz* the group is concerned about a casino’s effect on manufacturing jobs.

“Our research further demonstrates that casino gambling has a negative trickle down effect on manufacturing productivity through increased absenteeism, tardiness, bankruptcies and gambling-related illnesses. As a nation, we must do everything we can to protect Michigan’s remaining manufacturing jobs through increased productivity and quality,” Jandernoa wrote in a letter to the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs.

The promise of 1,800 new jobs in a period of high unemployment and lost manufacturing jobs cannot be overlooked, according to some casino supporters. Nye noted that 400-500 businesses have filed applications to be vendors for the proposed development.

Wayland Area Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Jackie Straub said her organization supports the tribe's efforts. Area businesses polled by the chamber are 75-80 percent in favor of the new casino.

"There's so many jobs in Allegan County that have been lost in the last two years. We absolutely support anything that brings quality and fair employment opportunities," Straub told *MiBiz*. She added that she understands the viewpoint of those opposed to the casino, yet no one has come up with another job-producing alternative to fill the vacant Ampro Manufacturing building. The tribe has already received approval from Wayland Township to build a new cultural center.

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