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Defeated, Ho-chunk To Refocus

Growth Is Planned

The Capital Times :: FRONT :: 1A

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By Judith Davidoff The Capital Times

Minutes after Ho-Chunk President George Lewis conceded that Dane County residents had rejected his tribe's bid to turn the DeJope bingo hall into a casino, he said the Ho-Chunk Nation would refocus its attention on developing the 46 acres it owns surrounding the facility.

"We'll continue to grow," he said in an interview at the Concourse Hotel, where tribal leaders and members gathered Tuesday night with supporters. "We're business people."

The final results of the vote were:

No 93,530

Yes 51,543

Ho-Chunk's revenue-sharing agreements with the city and county -- which would have provided each municipality with about \$3.5 million a year if a casino had opened at DeJope -- included a clause to prohibit the tribe from opening anything at DeJope that would compete with the Alliant Energy Center or Monona Terrace Convention Center.

It would have also prohibited Ho-Chunk from building a convention center of more than 10,000 square feet at DeJope or a theater venue of more than 3,000 seats.

The absence of an agreement, however, expands Ho-Chunk's options, he said.

"Now I guess we can grow as big as we want," Lewis said.

He said the expansion plans, approved by the Ho-Chunk Legislature and Madison Plan Commission in 2000, call for a hotel, water park and retail space, among other things.

"Four years ago we had plans," he said. "They haven't changed."

Lewis said that a joint committee of city and Ho-Chunk representatives

was being reconvened to write zoning regulations for the land the tribe owns around DeJope.

"We will work with the city on developing our area," he said.

In his concession comments, Lewis stressed Ho-Chunk's deep roots in the region and said the tribe would continue to operate DeJope as a bingo hall.

"We've been here 10,000 years and we'll continue to be here," Lewis said. He also said tribal members should be proud of the campaign they ran.

"Our nation came into this referendum with dignity and honor and we're going to leave with that," he said.

Lewis and other tribal leaders were critical of Mayor Dave Cieslewicz, who became an active opponent of the casino and who charged that the Ho-Chunk had not secured guarantees that the revenue-sharing agreement it negotiated with the city was enforceable.

"It was an attack on our integrity as a nation," he said of the mayor's assertions.

But the tribe accepts the results of the referendum, Lewis said.

"The people have made their choice," he said. "It's not our loss, it's the loss of the taxpayers of the county and city."

Dane County Executive Kathleen Falk, who, unlike Cieslewicz, was a big booster of the proposed casino, said in an interview she respected the "voice and outcome of the citizens' vote."

Falk said she did not share Cieslewicz's concerns about the enforceability of the agreements.

"I know we worked in good faith and had no reason to believe Ho-Chunk wasn't going to follow through with the commitments they made," Falk said.

Michelle Greendeer, legal counsel to the Ho-Chunk Legislature, did indicate an interest in litigation, despite Ho-Chunk Attorney General Rebecca Weise's previous comments to The Capital Times that the tribe would not pursue alternative means to site a casino if the referendum failed.

Greendeer said the Ho-Chunk could have run a more effective campaign by better presenting evidence that other Ho-Chunk casinos have proved to be positive influences in their communities.

But she also criticized casino opponents for spreading misinformation about the Ho-Chunk Nation.

"I didn't like my people dragged through the mud to blow smoke on the casino issue," said Greendeer, who noted No Dane Casino representatives wrongly accused the nation of not paying property taxes and unemployment compensation insurance.

Tribal member Tim White Eagle said it was a mistake for Ho-Chunk to agree, in its compact with the state of Wisconsin, to hold a referendum on the proposed casino at DeJope.

"Did the white man come in here and do a referendum to take our land away?" he asked. "Appeasement has got to stop."

Christine Funmaker-Romano, a Ho-Chunk legislator, said she does not regret voting for the compact.

But she said she wanted her tribe to be able to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities freely.

"We want to reap the benefits this country has reaped on our backs," she said.

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