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Tribes lobbying for urban casino

By Patrick Springer

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The Forum - 02/29/2004

The White Earth and Red Lake Chippewa bands face daunting odds in their bold roll of the dice to open a Twin Cities casino in partnership with Minnesota.

Having a piece of the lucrative Minneapolis-St. Paul market, the tribes argue, would level a playing field now heavily skewed toward a few tribal casinos in or near the metro area.

But the idea runs into fierce resistance from several fronts, ranging from those who adamantly oppose any expansion of gambling to rival tribes that don't welcome turf challenges.

To try to overcome that opposition, the urban casino proposal comes with a budgetary sweetener: The state would pocket about 40 percent of the revenues -- an estimated \$90 million a year -- with the remainder split between the two northwest Minnesota tribes.

The tribes estimate a casino built in the north Twin Cities suburbs would generate revenues of \$200 million to \$250 million a year. White Earth's annual share would be \$65 million -- more than 17 times the \$3.75 million it nets annually from its Shooting Star Casino in Mahanomen.

By comparison, the White Earth tribe's annual general fund budget is \$9.6 million.

"So you can see it would be a boon to us here," said Doyle Turner, White Earth tribal chairman.

For those who oppose an expansion of gambling, Turner, who is an Episcopal priest, invites naysayers to visit White Earth, where unemployment remains entrenched above 50 percent and per capita income hovers around \$10,000.

"I agree that it isn't the greatest way to solve problems," he said of casinos as economic development, "but I see the greater immorality is the poverty we have here."

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House passes ag bill, delays

Among about 5,000 tribal members living on the reservation, located about 50 miles northeast of Fargo-Moorhead, the waiting list for standard housing numbers more than 600, according to tribal officials.

"People in the Twin Cities have no idea how we live up here," said Ron Valiant, the tribe's executive director.

By contrast, members of the tiny Shakopee Mdewakanton Dakota Community reportedly receive payments of \$1 million or more annually from the Mystic Lake Casino in Prior Lake, a suburb south of Minneapolis.

"That's just mind-boggling," Valiant said.

Figures like those, widely publicized and often cited by state officials straining to balance Minnesota's budget, help fuel a public misperception that all reservations are wallowing in casino profits, he said.

The White Earth and Red Lake tribes argue that, "by accident of geography," they never will be able to realize the lofty profits like those of the "Big Three" among Minnesota's 18 American Indian casinos: Mystic Lake, Treasure Island Resort and Casino near Red Wing, and Grand Casino Hotel near Mille Lacs.

Sen. Keith Langseth, D-Glyndon, who supports the urban casino bill, estimated the Shakopee Mdewakanton's Mystic Lake Casino accounts for 60 percent of reservation gaming profits, a windfall for its 200 members.

"They're dividing just huge amounts of money," he said.

The urban casino legislation gives the state an opportunity to capture a significant portion of gaming; right now, the tribes have no incentive to renegotiate compacts that have no expiration date.

"So the only way we have some leverage is from competition or the threat of competition," Langseth said.

Minnesota now receives \$150,000 a year from 11 tribes' casinos under compacts signed 15 years ago. Gov. Tim Pawlenty recently signaled an interest in reopening the compacts -- presumably for a bigger state cut -- but the tribes have no interest in renegotiating with the state.

However, supporters stress, the White Earth and Red Lake tribes' urban casino is the only proposal before lawmakers that would give Minnesota a share of the revenues.

"They have a proposal that makes the state a partner," said Rep. Bill Haas, R-Champlin, the chief House author of the urban casino bill.

Outside the Twin Cities and nearby resort areas, tribal casinos basically are breaking even, with only modest revenues left after prizes and other expenses, Haas said.

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Given their relative remoteness from major population centers, the White Earth and Red Lake tribes never will have the opportunity for substantial profits like those of tribes dealt luckier hands by geography -- unless the urban casino proposal is accepted, he said.

The infusion of \$130 million a year to the two tribes would bring an economic windfall to all of northwest Minnesota, because casino profits would multiply as they ripple through the regional economy, Haas said.

DFL budget plan eliminates about 40 top administrators

"Everybody in the area, whether Native American or not, is going to benefit," he said. "This is not a Native American issue. This is a Minnesota issue."

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The argument that fairness, in terms of casino profitability, never was part of the 1988 federal law that enabled reservation gambling, said John McCarthy, executive director of the Minnesota Indian Gaming Association.

House increases meth penalties

"It doesn't talk about equity," he said. "That was not the intent of Congress."

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Most reservations are remote, and all have had their land holdings greatly diminished, McCarthy said. The tribes with the greatest casino wealth usually are the poorest in land and natural resources.

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Also, he added, the White Earth and Red Lake tribes' proposed off-reservation, urban casino would set a dangerous precedent.

"Our concern is the domino effect," McCarthy said. "If we open the door, there's no end to it. What comes along with that is unlimited gambling, which we think is bad for rural Minnesota."

*03/25/2004***Minnesota House of Representatives: Gay marriage ban OK'd**

With all of the forces lined up in opposition, and competing measures, including the "racino" proposal, which would mean a state-operated casino at the Canterbury Downs racetrack, the urban casino bill will have a hard time even making it to a floor vote, many agreed.

*03/24/2004***Offender bill near House panel OK**

But the White Earth and Red Lake tribes and their supporters vow to keep fighting.

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"We're climbing the mountain," Haas said. "We're down at the bottom just looking up."

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But he added that the bill's ultimate fate won't be decided until the session is gavelled to an end in May.

*03/21/2004***Legislative issues: Minnesota committee hearings overflowing with outdoors concerns**

"This bill will be alive until they sine die the last day of the session," he said.

Turner, White Earth tribal chairman, predicts the state's best interest ultimately will persuade legislators to support the urban casino.

"I think the needs of the state and the needs of our two

03/20/2004

**Minnesota
legislative briefs:
Stadium action
soon**

tribes would be the lead argument," he said. "We could do this without expanding gambling a whole lot."

The bottom line, he said, is that without the urban casino, the economic fortunes of White Earth aren't likely to improve significantly in the foreseeable future.

03/18/2004

**Tribal casino
advances another
step**

"The question has to be asked," Turner added, "after hundreds of years of federal oversight, why is this so bad and when can we expect an end to that?"

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