



## Tribe's casino dreams may fly

By Don Davis

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ST. PAUL – A change of heart may help get a proposed Twin Cities casino built for two northwest Minnesota Indian bands while bolstering the state treasury with gambling profits.

Some Minnesota state Senate Democrats now say their party's opposition to the plan is fading.

Legislative Republicans have been much more willing to use gambling money to help fund state government. The possible Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party shift pleases White Earth-Red Lake backers.

"I'm getting pretty excited about it," said Rep. Bill Haas, R-Champlin, the House sponsor of the proposal.

Haas said he is optimistic the plan will pass its final House committee hurdle on Tuesday, heading to a vote of the full House. A companion bill awaits action in its first Senate committee.

Rep. Kent Eken, DFL-Twin Valley, and other Democrats say that if any gambling proposal has a chance to pass this year, it is the Red Lake-White Earth proposal because it would help the state's poorest area.

"There seems to be movement in that direction," Eken said.

"I think the caucus knows that something has to happen," Sen. Dallas Sams, DFL-Staples, said. "There are some bands still in poverty."

Erma Vizenor, a candidate for White Earth Tribal Chairman, said Wednesday she supports the plan to build the second casino.

"It would level the playing field for tribes in gaming," she said.

The other candidate for chairman in the tribe's June election, Chip Wadena, could not be reached for comment.

Senate Majority Leader Dean Johnson, DFL-Willmar, last week opened the door to gambling, specifically mentioning the state's "poorer tribes." He said some Democrats would consider a new casino, horse-racing track, card clubs or other type of gambling.

Senate Democrats always have opposed more gambling, saying it could threaten existing Indian casinos. However, Sams and Johnson said Minnesotans are telling many senators that it is time for the state to benefit from casino revenues.

"If the Senate Democrats are willing to shift, that is encouraging," Gov. Tim Pawlenty, a Republican and longtime gambling foe, said.

Pawlenty said he wants gambling bills to continue moving because they give him more leverage in current negotiations with tribes. He wants them to donate some of their casino profits to the state.

The governor said he will consider signing any gambling bill that gives the state money.

The White Earth-Red Lake proposal would provide the state an estimated \$90 million a year and \$65 million a year to each band.

To sell the plan, the two bands bought airtime on Minnesota radio stations last week.

Each member of the small Shakopee tribe – which runs Mystic Lake casino in the southwest Twin Cities – receives millions of dollars in profits, the spots say. In the meantime, White Earth and Red Lake make up 65 percent of the state's Indian population, but receive about 5 percent of the state's gaming revenue.

"Success in gaming in Minnesota is an accident of geography," Haas said.

The northwest bands say their existing casinos cannot earn much money because they are so far away from a population base.

A woman hired by the bands to help find financing said that casinos can help turn around poor tribes. Valerie Red Horse said she has seen tribe after tribe benefit from gaming.

Red Horse said the proposed casino should be successful within 40 miles of the Twin Cities. No site has been selected, but it is good that other casinos are in the area, she added.

A "cluster effect" would help attract business to all casinos in the area, she said.

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