



Okla. tribe seeking casino

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Staff writer

(March 19, 2004) — The Seneca-Cayuga Tribe of Oklahoma made a pitch in Albany this week to settle its longstanding land claim with the state in return for approval to build a casino — potentially in Rochester.

The push is the latest effort by the tribe to end years of land-claim disputes and get into the lucrative gambling business, which the state continues to expand.

And in recent months, the tribe, backed by Rochester-area mall magnate Thomas C. Wilmot, has set its sights on potentially building a casino in Rochester.

“We talked about how we could create a win-win solution that would alleviate the negative financial consequences of the judgment, help the state to expand its revenue stream and enable regions in the state to benefit from new economic development,” said tribe spokesman George McGrath.

The *Democrat and Chronicle* reported six weeks ago that the tribe and Wilmot have had serious talks with local leaders about putting a casino at either the Sibley Building, which a Wilmot corporation owns, or at the struggling Midtown Plaza.

The tribe has pitched building a long-awaited performing arts center as part of the casino plan. It has also looked at constructing a casino in the Catskills.

Some Rochester-area legislators are interested in the potential, seeing it as way to complement economic development projects already planned for downtown and the May 1 launch of daily ferry service between Rochester and Toronto.

“I have an interest in trying to make this a cultural, educational and tourism mecca, and I think a casino could only enhance that,” said state Sen. Joseph Robach, R-Greece, who met with the tribe’s representatives along with Sen. Michael Nozzolio, R-Fayette, Seneca County.

Robach said he’s waiting for “a hard proposal.”

One issue raised during the brief meetings this week with various state legislators, including Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno, R-Brunswick, Rensselaer County, is what scope a casino would take.

According to a state compact, the Seneca Indian Nation, which operates a casino in Niagara Falls, has exclusive rights to operate slot machines west of Route 14, which runs south from Sodus Point in Wayne County to the Pennsylvania border, state aides said.

So the Seneca-Cayugas discussed instead installing table games and video lottery terminals, which are similar to slots but run by a centralized computer system, said Charles Carrier, an Assembly spokesman.

Wilmot could not be reached for comment Thursday.

A downtown casino could face years of bureaucratic hurdles and opponents, including Mayor William A. Johnson Jr.

The tribe also has many of its own issues:

Gov. George Pataki hasn't been willing to negotiate with the Oklahomans, saying the gambling welcome mat is out only for in-state tribes.

A federal judge also has yet to decide whether the tribe can resume building a \$25 million high-stakes bingo hall in the Finger Lakes town of Aurelius in Cayuga County.

A federal appeals court plans to hear arguments Wednesday on a 24-year-old land-claim settlement between the tribe and the Cayuga Indian Nation, McGrath said. U.S. District Judge Neal P. McCurn decided on \$247 million in damages in 2001 for both tribes.

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