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Local News - Friday, February 13, 2004

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State leaders consider non-Indian casinos

By **MARK JOHNSON**
The Associated Press

ALBANY -- State leaders are considering an amendment to the state constitution that would allow non-Indians to open casinos, officials said Thursday.

The move could push several Indian nations to resolve differences with the state and complete the six casinos the governor and Legislature authorized the tribes to open in 2001, some officials said.

"This certainly will put pressure on Native Americans to rethink their positions," said Orange County Republican state Sen. John Bonacic, the bill's Senate sponsor. "But whether they do or not, this will continue to go forward."

Kevin Quinn, a spokesman for Gov. George Pataki, said the governor has been "exploring this type of constitutional amendment."

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver said he is opposed to the amendment, fearing it could delay the construction of casinos even longer. He said it was too early to tell whether it would pass the Assembly or Senate.

"I'm afraid the governor is using this proposal to slow down this process," Silver said. "I am concerned that the economic development, jobs, revenue for the state will be delayed. The proposal will give the governor an excuse to drag his feet further."



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The legislation is being introduced in the Assembly by Aileen Gunther, a Democrat representing Orange and Sullivan counties, Bonacic said.

Legislation authorizing up to six casinos to be built in Western New York and the Catskills, and video slot machines at horse racing tracks was signed into law in October 2001.


So far, only one of the six casinos has been opened -- by the Seneca Indian Nation in Niagara Falls.

"Revenues that were anticipated to fund economic development and initiatives that we proposed, the governor proposed and that the Assembly proposed have not materialized because the process has not moved forward," said John McArdle, a spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno. "There is a high degree of frustration in our house that these are not moving forward in the Catskills."

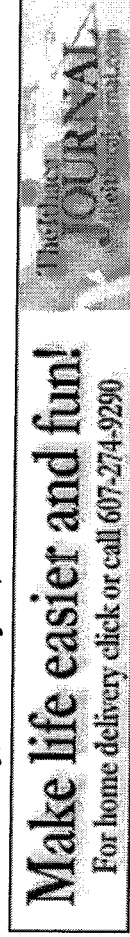
In October, the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe withdrew from a tentative land claim agreement brokered with the state that included a compact for a proposed tribal casino in Sullivan County. The agreement would have allowed slot machines there and at the Akwesasne Casino at St. Regis, with the state getting a cut of the revenue.

Calls to the St. Regis Mohawks and the Oneida Nation, which runs the Turning Stone casino in central New York, were not immediately returned.

The bill to amend the constitution would have to be approved by two consecutively elected state Legislatures and then by New York voters. The earliest a statewide vote on such an amendment could happen is November 2005.

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