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GAMBLING

Cayugas gain ground on casino

By DAN HERBECK
News Staff Reporter
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A small, poor and splintered Indian nation headquartered in Gowanda could stand on the verge of developing one of the state's largest casinos in a tourism playground 90 miles northwest of New York City.

A regional office of the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs has recommended approval of plans by the 500-member Cayuga Indian Nation of New York to build a \$500 million casino at Monticello Raceway in Monticello.

The Cayugas' plan still needs approval of the assistant secretary of the federal agency, the National Indian Gaming Commission and Gov. George E. Pataki. But sources familiar with the proposal said the recent action taken by the BIA puts the Cayugas ahead of several other Indian nations, including the Senecas, that have been vying for the project.

"This is a milestone for us," said Timothy W. Twoguns of Irving, a leader and spokesman for the Cayugas. "It looks as though we've got the federal government on our side. Now, the next step is getting the support of the governor."

The proposed casino - which would be the first in the popular Catskills tourism area - could become a gold mine.

Such a project, less than two hours from the nation's most populated city, would dwarf the two casinos opened by the Senecas in Niagara Falls and Salamanca.

"If it's built, I think it would be a huge success," said Richard M. Sush, village manager of Monticello. "Hundreds of thousands of people from New York (City) have been coming here in the summer for years. This would be a major attraction for them."

Sush said he is "guardedly optimistic" that the Cayugas' project will be built in Monticello. He said casino advocates have been pushing for such a project in the Catskills for decades.

"Over the years, we've seen many proposals, but none of them have ever gotten this far through the process with the Bureau of Indian Affairs," Sush said. "I personally think it's going to happen. But I think, generally, people are taking the attitude, 'I'll believe it when I see it.'"

According to government officials, the agency's eastern regional office in Nashville issued a 14-page report on April 27, recommending that 30 acres of land at the race track be taken into trust for the Cayugas. The regional office also recommended the proposed casino would benefit both the Cayugas and the Monticello community.

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Todd Alhart, a spokesman in Pataki's office, said the state is "encouraged" by the report. "The state is encouraged by the proposed finding of the eastern region of the BIA, and we await a final decision from the assistant secretary of Indian Affairs," Alhart said late Wednesday.

Alhart declined any further comment on the Cayugas' proposal.

The Cayugas have partnered with a Monticello-based development company, Empire Resorts, in the effort to develop a Las Vegas-style casino in Monticello. The proposed attraction is called the Cayuga Catskill Resort and Casino.

On the Empire Resorts Web site, the company has posted an announcement of a labor agreement covering 1,500 workers for the proposed project.

"The Cayuga Nation applications for the planned casino are currently pending approval by the Secretary of the Interior and the National Indian Gaming Commission," the company said. While some reports have suggested construction could begin as soon as this summer, Twoguns said it is impossible to estimate how long it might take the Cayugas to get all the required approvals. He said the Cayugas and Empire Resorts filed their applications with the government in April 2003.

The Cayugas have flown far under the public radar in pursuing a casino project, while the Senecas were building their projects in Niagara Falls and Salamanca.

"I wouldn't say we were inspired by the Senecas, but we've been watching what they've been doing, and it's time for our people to step up," said Twoguns, who represents the Turtle Clan on the Cayuga Nation Council.

"We pursued this because it's time to build something and do something for our people."

Like the Senecas, the Cayugas are part of the six-nation Iroquois Confederacy. Unlike the Senecas, the Cayugas do not have their own reservation. Most of the nation's approximately 500 members live in Western New York, with many living on the Senecas' Cattaraugus Reservation, and other Indian territories in the region.

For at least 20 years, the Cayugas have been involved in a bitter federal court battle over land claims in Seneca and Cayuga counties, near Cayuga Lake. The Cayugas allege that more than 64,000 acres of land was wrongly taken from them by the state in the late 1700s and early 1800s.

In 2000, a federal judge in Syracuse awarded \$248 million to the Cayugas on the land claim, but the award is under appeal.

"The state says we signed over our tribal homelands to them," Twoguns said. "That isn't true. We were driven off our homelands by the Continental Army, burning everything in sight."

The Cayugas, the Senecas and several other tribes have been trying to develop a casino in the Catskills region.

Cyrus M. Schindler Jr., chairman of the Senecas gaming corporation, said he was not aware of the latest developments involving the Cayugas' proposal. He said he wishes the Cayugas well if they are successful in landing the Catskills project.

"We have a good relationship with them. A lot of Cayugas live on our territory," Schindler said.

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