

Federal Land Swap Legislation Could Create Two New Northern Lower Peninsula Casinos

By Mike Modrzynski

Federal legislation aimed at ending two Upper Peninsula tribes' claims to a 200-acre parcel along the St. Marys River known as Charlotte Beach will also open the door for two more casinos in northern Michigan. The law will clear the way for the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians and the Bay Mills Indian Community to build casinos south of the Mackinac Bridge.

House Bill 2495, introduced by U.S. Representative Bart Stupak of Menominee, will end tribal claims to land in Chippewa County in exchange for placing more than 20 acres each in trust for the Bay Mills and Sault Ste. Marie tribes. In exchange for the alternative sites being placed in trust, defined in Stupak's bill, the tribes will relinquish all claims, including land and natural resource rights, to the present landowners.

The tribe's lawsuit alleges the state sold the land in the Charlotte Beach area without consent of the tribes or the federal government. The land was allegedly placed in trust more than a century ago, but was sold at a tax sale in the late 1800s.

The bill will place a 21.55 acre parcel near Vanderbilt in trust for Bay Mills Indian Community and sets aside up to 25 acres somewhere between M-46 and the Mackinac Bridge for the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians. The Sault tribe has not designated a site for its Northern Lower Peninsula casino, should the legislation be signed into law.

Stupak's bill stipulates that the land chosen by the Sault tribe cannot be closer than 25 miles from the Vanderbilt site owned by Bay Mills or lands held in trust for any other tribe, other than the Sault tribe. The Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians operates a casino in Petoskey and has reservation lands in the Harbor Springs-Cross Village area of northwestern Michigan. In 1998, the Odawas attempted to open a casino in Mackinaw City, but the effort was struck down by an Ingham County judge, who ruled the bands' agreement with the State of Michigan violated the state constitution.

Little Traverse Bay Bands Chairman Gerald Chingwa said his tribe's

plans for a casino in Mackinaw City are not a high priority right now, but he said the bands should be the only tribe permitted to build there.

"Mackinaw City is on the back burner for now, while we continue to develop our casino in Petoskey (Victories Casino on US-131)," Chingwa said. "We have filed objections in state and federal courts over any proposed move by the Sault or Bay Mills tribes into northern Michigan because that would infringe on Little Traverse Bands territory and reservation boundaries. I can assure you we will continue to act with the best economic interests of the Bands in mind."

Sault Tribe Communications Director John Hatch said Thursday, December 13, he had no comment on the matter.

Bay Mills tribal attorney Kathryn Tierney was not available for comment.

Vanderbilt Village Clerk Sharon Duff said residents of the village and the surrounding township are overwhelmingly in support of the Bay Mills casino. A letter writing campaign conducted two weeks ago resulted in more than 900 letters of support for the project.

"The first resolution the Village Council passed was about two years ago and the board unanimously supported the plans for a casino," Duff said. "Everyone here is very excited about the prospects for success of the federal legislation that might finally clear the way for a casino here. We welcome the casino and the

employment and its economic benefits to the community."

Otsego County Coordinator Lambert Chard said the County Board of Commissioners continue to oppose casinos proposed for Vanderbilt and a site near Gaylord. During a telephone interview Monday, December 17, Chard said the board originally passed a resolution opposing any plans to construct a casino in Otsego County more than a year ago and haven't taken any action since to change that position.

"I wouldn't call it a 'wait-and-see attitude' for the commissioners, because I haven't seen anything from them that would indicate a change in attitude about casinos in Otsego County," Chard said. "The fact of the matter is, however, that the Village of Vanderbilt has its own zoning and can, and has, approved a resolution supporting the casino. The township (Corwith Township) has also added its approval for the casino."

Corwith Township Treasurer Marilyn Cole said the township board passed a resolution of support for the proposed casino more than a year ago and majority support for construction of the 45,000 square foot casino still exists.

"Our board passed a resolution supporting the siting of a casino in the township at the north end of the Village of Vanderbilt," Cole said. "The decision was not unanimous, but there was then, and still is today, sufficient support to pass it again if it came up for a vote again."

Santa's Checking This List Twice!



Fran Gagnon reads his wish list to Santa Claus (who sounded like Jim Lockhart) during the Pickford Lions Club Kids Christmas Party Saturday, December 15. More photos on Page 13.