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Nipmucs got Michigan loans for casino bid Chippewa's gave thousands as tribe sought recognition.

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COLUMN: THE NIPMUC GAMBLE

One of an occasional series The Michigan-based Sault Ste. Marie tribe of Chippewa Indians advanced thousands of dollars to the Nipmuc Nation of Sutton during 1997 to aid its quest for federal recognition and a casino.

In 1997, Nipmuc Nation economic development adviser Guy Conrad, working on behalf of the Nipmucs' tribal council at the time, brokered an agreement between the Nipmucs and the Sault Ste. Marie tribe, according to a Sault Ste. Marie spokesman and a tape recording of a 1997 meeting of the Nipmuc tribal council.

Under the agreement, the Michigan-based tribe loaned the Nipmucs as much as \$14,000 per month to fund its efforts toward tribal recognition and a casino, according to the recording of the meeting.

The agreement also outlined a series of payments to be made by the Sault Ste. Marie tribe to Mr. Conrad, owner of Farsight Marketing Inc. of Hingham, ranging from \$100,000 to as much as \$2 million, if a casino had been built, according to the recording. All of that was to be repaid from revenue from any casino the Nipmucs might build.

The Sault Ste. Marie tribe pulled out of the deal by 1999, however, because the Nipmuc Nation's efforts to obtain federal recognition were taking too long, said John Hatch, spokesman for the Sault Ste. Marie tribe.

At the same time, the Sault Ste. Marie tribe had made significant progress toward building the \$500 million Greektown Casino they operate today in Detroit. The Mediterranean-themed casino has 2,400 slot machines and 103 game tables in 75,000 square feet. The tribe runs five other casinos in Michigan.

“We just didn't look at them as a viable project anymore,” said Mr. Hatch. “We were involved in building our Detroit casino, and we put our resources into that. We pulled out because we needed all our available resources.”

It is unlikely that the Sault Ste. Marie would seek the return of those funds, even if the Nipmucs someday build a casino, Mr. Hatch said. He was unable to pinpoint exactly how much the tribe spent on the Nipmuc effort.

The terms of the agreement were the subject of a contentious meeting between Mr. Conrad and the tribal council in 1997.

Then Tribal Chairman Ron Little Crow Henries and council member William Running River Gould Sr. questioned the terms of the agreement, and demanded that Mr. Conrad justify the sums of money being directed his way.

Mr. Henries has since left the tribe, and Mr. Gould has been placed on inactive status. Mr. Conrad remains an adviser to a reconfigured tribal council. He also is one of the tribe's registered lobbyists.

“You've got to show us what you're doing for your money,” Mr. Henries said to Mr. Conrad during the meeting. “This is not going to be welfare.”

Mr. Conrad defended his fees, saying they were comparable to what he has charged on other projects. The tribe never would have reached a deal with the Sault Ste. Marie without his efforts, he said during the 1997 meeting.

“How do you think we arrived at this? You've been leveraging me. How would you be talking to these guys (the Sault Ste. Marie) in the first place?” he said.

In the recording of the executive session, he also bristled at the council's

questioning of his decision-making on their behalf.

“I’ve poured my ... life into this for four and a half years,” he said. “I’m not going to do anything to screw it up.” Mr. Conrad can be heard pounding the table in front of him as he speaks.

In a statement, the **Nipmuc Nation** said it has no debts related to past agreements with outside parties.

“The **Nipmuc Nation** has no obligation from any prior agreements, all of which were concluded appropriately,” the statement reads.

The Nipmuc deal with the Sault Ste. Marie is similar to one it has established with Lakes Gaming Inc., a Minnesota-based casino management company.

Under that deal, Lakes will receive 35 percent of the profits from any casino it builds with the Nipmucs. Lakes also has agreed to loan an undetermined amount of money to the tribe to cover its legal and other costs as it seeks federal recognition. That money, which includes annual salaries of \$800 per month for tribal council members, will be repaid with interest to Lakes if and when a Nipmuc casino is opened.

That agreement also was arranged by Mr. Conrad, according to Lakes Gaming chief executive Lyle A. Berman.

The tribe cannot build a casino until it receives federal recognition and arrives at a gaming compact with either Massachusetts or Connecticut. A Clinton administration official recommended in January that the tribe be recognized. A Bush administration official later froze that decision. A final decision could come at any time, although Bureau of Indian Affairs officials have failed to meet several self-imposed deadlines.

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