

# Tribe's political rift has statewide impact

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The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, the largest official tribe east of the Mississippi and owner of Detroit's Greektown Casino, is in the midst of the fiercest turmoil in its 30-year history.

The FBI is investigating two written death threats against the chairman, Bernard Bouschor.

Bouschor has banned members from tribal land for what some say are minor infractions.

Recently, tribal Vice Chairman Aaron Payment beat Bouschor in a four-way primary, setting up the chairman for his toughest election in his 17 years in office. The final vote -- a mail-in election -- will begin Friday, with votes counted June 24.

Some members of his tribe say Bouschor has become a dictator who wields too much control and has stayed too long. Others say he has been good for the tribe and should stay.

The politics within the 31,000-member tribe matter beyond its borders because it has become a powerful political force not only in the Upper Peninsula and Lansing, but also in Detroit. New leadership could chart a different course for the tribe's casinos in Detroit and Romulus.

Payment said that if he wins, the tribe won't have casinos in both cities. "We told people in Detroit we would be behind Greektown," he said. "If Romulus turns out to be a wonderful opportunity and we move in that direction, then we should let somebody else have the opportunity in Greektown. We can't talk out of both sides of our mouth."

The tribe plans a \$350-million reservation casino in Romulus, which infuriates Detroit city officials because it would compete with Detroit's casinos. The tribe should put a casino in Monroe or Flint instead, Payment said.

## Anger, suspicion build

The race for chairman has already been a hard-fought campaign that featured unsuccessful efforts by Bouschor's supporters to kick Payment off the tribal board. Anger and suspicion are rampant. The tribe will hand-count every vote in the upcoming election, because of fears its electronic ballot scanners aren't tamper-proof.

Nearly four years ago, Bouschor was on top of the world, cutting the ribbons on the sparkling new Greektown Casino, the first non-reservation casino in the United States owned by a tribe.

He had presided over the biggest expansion in the tribe's history, from its meager start in the early 1970s on a reservation without water and sewer connections to a \$750-million empire that dominates the eastern UP. His tribe owns six casinos, more than any other American Indian tribe.

But along the way, critics say Bouschor has piled up hundreds of millions of dollars in debt; rewarded his relatives with high-paying jobs; fired or silenced his opponents, and put white people in top jobs.

While most tribal members who work for the casino or tribe make minimum wage and get no direct payments from tribal casinos, Bouschor has a salary of more than \$850,000 as chief executive officer of the casinos. Until this year, his salary was secret.

Revenue at the Greektown Casino lags behind the other Detroit casinos. Businesses the tribe started in the 1990s with much fanfare have failed and closed, including a neon firm and an auto supply company. Profits at the tribe's reservation casinos in the Upper Peninsula dipped last year. Nearly 40 percent of the funding for tribal programs still comes from the state or federal government.

Bouschor, mild-mannered and soft-spoken, said his opponents and critics would halt the tribe's progress. Payment's plan to drop the Romulus casino doesn't make sense because it will generate as much money as the Greektown Casino with half the debt, Bouschor said.

"The caliber of individuals trying to replace me would destroy the tribe," he said. "They have no concept of the overall finances of the government and the casinos."

Payment, 38, still lives in the reservation home he grew up in and that had no indoor plumbing until he was 15. He holds a master's degree in public administration and serves on the Greektown Casino management board.

"Our revenue changed the perspective of some of the leaders," he said. "They lost touch with the average person in the tribe. I want to shift our focus back to the Indian values of meeting the needs of the neediest first."

Payment said Bouschor fired him last summer from his job as the tribe's assistant executive director after the two clashed. Bouschor said Payment resigned. Payment said Bouschor rules by fear and retaliates against his opponents.

Last month, Bouschor barred two Cheboygan brothers from tribal property for six months because one of them refused to stop speaking after asking a question at a board meeting. "He was being disruptive," Bouschor said of Clarence Hudac, who was escorted out of the meeting by tribal police. "He wouldn't give up the microphone."

Hudac, who supports Payment, said he was trying to talk about the concerns of tribal members who live off the reservation and do not have their own representative on the tribal board. "I was trying to get him to answer questions people have," Hudac said. "I pleaded with him and he gaveled me out of order."

Then, Hudac and his brother were served paperwork officially banning them. "I'm exiled," Hudac said. "Bouschor stepped over the line and went too far."

At the same meeting, Bouschor supporters tried to remove Payment from the tribal board, charging him with various offenses. The petitioners withdrew the charges before an angry crowd. It was the seventh time Payment said he has faced removal. Removal of a member is done by the board itself, rather than by a vote of the people.

Theresa DeLorme, Bouschor's former secretary, was one of those who tried to remove Payment. She wouldn't discuss that, but said she worked for Bouschor for 16 years and never saw any evidence of unethical behavior or wrongdoing. "He's a very bright man," she said. "He's been good for the tribe. Except for this internal fighting, our tribe is doing well."

Some members say that they don't know where all the casino money goes and fear that their grandchildren will be saddled with debt.

"The Greeks got all the money and we got the shaft," said Robert LaPoint, a tribal elder and board member. In 1999, the tribe agreed to pay its former Greektown partners Jim Papas and Ted Gatzaros about \$265 million to leave the partnership because they could not get gaming licenses. The tribe should never have given the two men, who put up little capital, a 40-percent share of the casino, he said.

As a board member, LaPoint said he often doesn't know about deals the tribe has made until they're already done. He said he read in the newspaper that the cost of the tribe's new permanent casino hotel in Detroit had grown to \$450 million, when he had thought the cost was \$350 million. He also found out about a casino the tribe once planned in Gaylord through the newspapers.

Last summer, veteran tribal board member and former executive director Mike Lumsden was removed from the board, after Bouschor had already fired him. His offenses were said to have included election fraud, employee harassment and past domestic abuse. Testimony against him included hearsay and he was never criminally charged. Lumsden has said Bouschor targeted him because he disagreed with him about tribal finances and authority.

Lumsden's father was the last chairman of the tribe before Bouschor. The removal, which is not appealable, caused a sharp rift.

Other differences have potentially more serious consequences. Bouschor said that in January, he received two written letters demanding that he resign, or the writer would kill members of his family. The letters contained very specific information about where his family members lived, which most tribal members wouldn't know, he said. The FBI has not yet determined who wrote the letters, Bouschor said.

Bouschor said opponents are misrepresenting him and what he has done for the tribe. Someday, he plans to step down -- just not yet, he said.

"I don't consider myself a dictator," he said. "We're wasting energy with all this negativity. It's slowed us down. But if you look at other tribes, we're still far ahead."