



The Day (New London, Conn.)

Mohegan Chairman Talks Up Casino Idea To Mass. Legislators

By Heather Allen

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Only standing room was left as top gambling executives, union activists and politicians jammed into the Gardner Auditorium at the Massachusetts Statehouse Tuesday in Boston.

They gathered to hear and give testimony related to a bill sponsored by Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick that calls for three resort casinos to be built in the Bay State in an effort to spark economic growth and generate new revenue for the state.

Bruce "Two Dogs" Bozsum, chairman of the Mohegan Tribe, was the only tribal member to testify at the hearing. Both he and Mitchell Etess, president and CEO of the Mohegan Gaming Authority, were asked about the history of Mohegan Sun and the impact the casino has had on the area, as well as their plans for a casino in Palmer, Mass., Bozsum said in a phone interview after the hearing.

A lot of Tuesday's discussion centered on Native American deals and how they work, Bozsum said. And while the Mohegan Gaming Authority is interested in building a resort casino in Massachusetts, Bozsum reiterated that the deal would be strictly commercial in nature.

"We are a tribe, but we are looking at an opportunity as a commercial business," he said. "We are not bringing in a reservation."

Bozsum said questions were posed about the deal the tribe made with Mohegan Sun investors Sol Kerzner and Len Wolman, in which the tribe bought them out early and agreed to pay the men a cut of the casino's earnings.

Overall, Bozsum said, the trip to Boston Tuesday was positive, and people seemed enthused about expanding gaming in the Bay State.

"Everyone's interested in what's going to happen there," he said.

Top gaming-industry executives, who were also present, disagreed about the number of resort casinos Massachusetts should build.

Patrick's bill, which calls for a minimum investment of \$1 billion, would allow for three casinos to be built in different regions throughout the state: the Boston area, southeastern Massachusetts and western or central Massachusetts.

Sheldon Adelson, chief executive officer of casino operator Las Vegas Sands Corp., said he may not bid for a license if more than two casinos are allowed, saying he believes three casinos would oversaturate the market.

“You'll never cut off that flow of money to Connecticut unless you build something equal to or better in Massachusetts,” Adelson said. “The more casinos you put up, the more dilution there is.”

But Gary Loveman, chief executive of the world's largest gambling company, Harrah's Entertainment Inc., disagreed, saying the market is “nowhere near oversaturation.”

To illustrate that point, Patrick spoke about his late mother, who would ask him to drive her to Foxwoods Resort Casino.

“And if my mother were alive today, my mother would be like the many adults I meet from all across the state who tell me that they have been making their own decisions their whole lives, and that it's not up to the state to tell them how they should and shouldn't spend their entertainment dollars,” Patrick said in his remarks.

And according to the governor, Massachusetts residents spend about \$1 billion at Connecticut's casinos each year.

Hundreds of thousands of residents visit Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun regularly, and one in four make an annual trip across the border, Patrick said.

The governor's bill, which was presented in September, faces tough opposition from House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi, who says he opposes an expansion of gambling for fear of bringing the “casino culture” to the state. DiMasi will preside over a series of hearings early next year that will focus on Patrick's bill.

Representatives from the United Auto Workers union were also present at Tuesday's hearing. The union said it will provide written testimony to lawmakers soon, urging that if casinos are built in the state, workers should have union representation.

“Elected officials in Massachusetts have the opportunity to learn from the Connecticut experience, and ensure from the start (that) gaming employees have a path to unionize without interference from their employer,” Bob Madore, director of UAW Region 9, said in a statement. “We hope as the gaming legislation develops, these protections will be included without loopholes.”

Table-game dealers at Foxwoods voted last month to approve representation by the UAW. The Mashantucket Pequot Tribe is contesting the election.