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Cayugas adding to their holdings

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By Scott Rapp
Staff writer

The Cayuga Indian Nation of New York is acquiring more ancestral land in the town of Seneca Falls, a nation spokesman confirmed Wednesday.

The Cayugas are buying about 14 acres of commercial property adjacent to their combination convenience store/gas station and electronic video bingo hall on Route 89, near the entrance to Cayuga Lake State Park, said Clint Halftown, the nation's representative.

The pending acquisition, Halftown said, continues the nation's attempt to regain ownership of some 64,000 acres of ancestral land around the northern tip of Cayuga Lake - which comprises the Cayuga Indian land-claim area.

Halftown said the nation has no immediate plans for the property, about 2 miles southeast of the village of Seneca Falls, but added that it gives the Cayugas the potential to expand their business ventures in the future.

Currently, the 14 acres house Cayuga Outdoor World and an adjoining campground owned by Eric and Meri Riegel, of Romulus.

Eric Riegel confirmed the pending sale and said he plans to move his boat repair business to a new location yet to be determined. He also sells used boats, and sells and installs boat hoists and docks.

Riegel said he expects to take some criticism for selling to the Cayugas because they can declare the land sovereign and take the property off the tax rolls. Like all New York state Indians, the Cayugas also refuse to collect and remit sales tax on gasoline and other merchandise they sell at their store.

"I'm sure there's going to be some negative talk," Riegel said.

Halftown and B.J. Radford, who manages the nation's business operations, both declined to reveal the sale price. Radford said she expects the sale to be closed in early spring, and said BEP Properties of Tonawanda is acquiring the land for the nation.

The Riegels acquired the boat business for \$176,000 three years ago and it is assessed for \$175,200, according to Seneca County records. In January 2002, the couple bought the 10-plus acre campground for \$115,000, which is the current assessed price, records show.

The Cayugas, whose leadership is squabbling over the nation's pending casino/land claim deal with the state, acquired the Route 89 gas station for \$220,000 in October 2003. Last September, the nation purchased 128 acres for \$375,000 in Union Springs, where the Cayugas own a high-stakes electronic bingo hall and combination convenience store and gas station and contiguous carwash.

This week, Halftown said he was voiding the casino deal to reflect the majority view of the nation's approximately 480 members, but Gary Wheeler, another nation official, said Halftown lacked the authority to scrap the settlement.

Under the proposed agreement, the nation would get a Las Vegas-style casino in the Catskills and receive up to \$150 million from the state.

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