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Halftown says casino could mean millions

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The Cayuga Indian Nation of New York is pressing forward with its bid to land a Las Vegas-style casino in the Catskills, despite opposition from a small group of nation dissidents.

That's the word from Clint Halftown, the nation's recognized spokesman, who signed the historic casino/land claim settlement with the state in November. The deal requires approval from Congress and the state Legislature.

In a recent interview with The Post-Standard, Halftown, 32, said profits from the casino would allow the nation to buy more land and create education programs, child care, elderly care and other government services for its approximately 500 members, most of whom live in the Buffalo area.

Q. What prompted the nation to make the casino-land claim deal with the state?

A. We see the possibility of Oneida versus Sherrill in the Supreme Court taking on the land claim case that will possibly — if they go against us — we could have nothing. So, we felt that we better get on board and get something before we didn't get anything at all.

Q. Were you afraid that you would get dealt out of the action?

A. Yes, it could be, it's a possibility. If the Supreme Court goes against us, we could ultimately end up having no land.

Q. It seems like the nation changed its position from five or six months ago when you signed the "memorandum of understanding" with the state. You didn't seem to be worried about the court ruling against you, or at least not as much. Right?

A. I guess it's coming out more that there's a possibility the court could go against us. You know and we're getting down to it.

Q. So you just didn't want to take that risk?

A. Right.

Q. What's the earliest date for opening the casino assuming this deal is approved by Congress and the state Legislature?

A. It will be 18 months from whenever we get the approvals. Probably 2007.

Q. I know, even for you, this whole process has been a reversal of your views regarding casino gambling. For so long, you said the Cayugas were opposed to gambling. For you, personally, what made you change your mind on it?

A. There's different circumstances, you know, nowadays that we didn't have years ago. We've got Seneca-Cayugas from Oklahoma coming in. They're willing to give up everything just for a casino and so we had to come back to our (governing) council and change our position, basically.

Q. How much money do you think the casino will generate for the Cayugas? Billions?

A. I think it's millions of dollars, you know, but I mean you've got to look at the state of Pennsylvania is going to open up casinos, we've got Atlantic City to compete with and we've got Connecticut to compete with. We're brand new in the market so we've got a lot of challenges to meet.

Q. How will the casino deal with the state benefit the nation?

A. It will have a guarantee of land. That's one thing the land claim has been about is land, the return of our land. And then we'll have economic revenue to support that land and other benefits for our members.

Q. Like what?

A. Education, child care, elderly care, government services. That's about it.

Q. What do you foresee using that land for?

A. Housing. That's the main thing.

Q. Do you ever see the day when the Cayugas will work cooperatively with the Seneca-Cayugas?

A. No, because the (Cayuga Nation) government stayed here. The government never went to Oklahoma, and they went as individuals. Then whatever happened, they got recognized (by the federal government) and then they came back as a recognized (tribe). To us, you're not a Seneca-Cayuga. You're either a Cayuga or a Seneca. You're not both.

So we don't understand. It's like, why now? Because they see an opportunity in New York to come back. Gaming, casinos, cigarettes, gas. They're just here to try to get what they can.

Q. Can you separate the casino from the land-claim agreement as some opponents of the proposed settlement have suggested?

A. It's impossible for the state to separate the two issues. We have land now, you know. We have this, all the land behind us that connects to the (bingo hall) and (the bingo hall) in Seneca Falls. (Regaining the land) is my first priority too, and I'm doing it.

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