

Mohawk councils back settlement with state

Pact could open door to creation of Catskills casino; tribe would get \$100M, land added to reservation

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ALBANY -- The St. Regis Mohawk tribal government expects to remove a key obstacle to creating a Catskills casino by entering into a land claim settlement with the state, but unresolved issues still stand in the way.

The three Mohawk councils that are plaintiffs on the land claim announced Wednesday their support for a deal giving them \$100 million from the state and the New York Power Authority. The state would also give St. Lawrence and Franklin counties a total of \$10 million to help pay for lost taxes and other costs associated with the Mohawks adding up to 14,778 acres to their reservation.

Not included are any agreements to have tribal cigarette and gasoline retailers collect sales taxes from non-Indians or raise prices to help off-reservation businesses be more competitive, a key issue for the Legislature. The settlement terms do not include a gaming compact for the Catskills, but Gov. George Pataki has maintained he won't grant casino rights without resolving land claims.

Elected chief James Ransom stressed the deal is still subject to a tribal referendum, set for Nov. 27, as well as ratification by the state Legislature and Congress. That could take at least a year.

"Our agreement with the governor's office is a verbal agreement," he said.

The deal applies to the St. Regis Tribal Council, which is the federally recognized government; the Mohawk Council Nation of Chiefs, a traditional group; and the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne, based in Canada. The land claim suit was lodged 22 years ago, alleging the state wrongly took 11,000 acres of reservation land plus islands in transactions more than 200 years ago.

The settlement calls for the three groups to share \$70 million from the Power Authority and \$30 million from the state, half of which the state

hopes to get from the federal government. The state and authority would grant two islands and 215 acres at Massena Point on the St. Lawrence River to the Mohawks.

Sen. Elizabeth Little, R-Queensbury, who represents the reservation area, said she is unsure if she supports the deal. She said some communities could lose large chunks of taxable property if the Mohawks reacquire reservation land.

The taxation issue, she said, could be worked out at a later date. "It has to be resolved," she said.

The deal also promises the Mohawks continuous use of nine megawatts of low-cost power from the authority and free tuition at state colleges and universities.

Pataki spokesman Kevin Quinn said it is unclear whether the governor will sign a bill requiring the state to collect taxes from Indian stores. A similar bill passed last year was never implemented by the state, and the regulation expired late last month.

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