

Ho-Chunk confident in Beloit casino plan

By Shaun Zinck szinck@beloitdailynews.com | Posted: Saturday, January 24, 2015 10:00 am

Ho-Chunk President Jon Greendeer said he is glad Gov. Scott Walker made a ruling on the Menominee casino proposal for Kenosha, adding he was surprised by the timing of the decision.

Walker said in a statement Friday “the risk to state’s taxpayers is too great” to approve the Kenosha casino project.

“Due to the compacts negotiated by Governor (Jim) Doyle, the current cost to taxpayers of approving the proposed casino project is up to \$100 million and the long-term economic hit to the state budget would be a potential loss of hundreds of millions of dollars,” Walker said in the statement.

Walker said the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) took more than nine years to review and approve the casino project, and Mike Huebsch, secretary for the Department of Administration spent a year looking over the economic impact of the casino. The economic study revealed “significant risks” to the state from possible litigation from other casinos, Walker said.

Greendeer wouldn’t comment on whether he was happy with the decision even though the Ho-Chunk Nation officially opposed the Kenosha project. He added he was expecting Walker to wait until the Feb. 19 deadline to make the decision.

“We were relieved that there was a decision made,” he said. “We are glad that this has been finalized and it does give us the prospects of moving forward.”

The Ho-Chunk is in the middle of a proposal to build an off-reservation casino in Beloit, however Greendeer said there has been no update on their project status.

The Environmental Impact Statement for the Beloit casino project is currently at the BIA office in Washington, D.C., and is waiting for approval from the office before being sent back to the regional BIA office in Minnesota.

He was still confident their applications would be approved based on a compact the Ho-Chunk Nation has with the state, which permits the Ho-Chunk to build another casino in the state.

“I think the compact that resulted wasn’t drafted with the intent to create ambiguity,” Greendeer said. “To obscure that is really going to be a big mountain to climb. We do hold (the Ho-Chunk and Menominee) compacts differently.”

Beloit City Manager Larry Arft said he hoped Walker’s decision on the Kenosha project would help move Beloit’s application forward. Arft said he believed the Ho-Chunk’s application was being held up mainly because no decision had been made on the Kenosha project.

“It was sort of our understanding that (the BIA) didn’t want to send another application forward until a decision on Kenosha had been made,” he said.

Arft also remained confident that the language in the Ho-Chunk’s compact was explicit in allowing another casino in the state.

“The compact with the state is different,” he said. “There is a contractual commitment that allows the Ho-Chunk to have another full service gaming facility in the state. So that should be the basis for the decision, and that should take precedent over any of the governor’s public policies.”

State Rep. Mark Spreitzer, D-Beloit, said he didn’t have a comment on the Kenosha casino project, but also believed it wouldn’t have any effect on the Beloit project. In 2012, while serving on the Beloit City Council, Spreitzer voted against the intergovernmental agreement between Beloit and the Ho-Chunk because he was concerned there weren’t enough protections for the city in the agreement. However, Spreitzer said Friday he would support the casino going forward.

“Since it’s the city’s position to move forward with this project I would certainly like to see federal and state approval,” he said. “Should the project come to the state I would certainly urge the governor to approve the project.”