

Kenosha, no; up next, Beloit

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ABOUT A WEEK AGO, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel published a report on two letters it had obtained. The letters were written to Gov. Scott Walker and were signed by big-player social conservatives in Iowa, pointedly telling Walker that Iowans would look very negatively on any decision from the governor that did not reflect an anti-gambling position.

On Thursday, The Des Moines Register reported Walker had hired Iowan David Polyansky to help set up his presidential campaign, focusing on the state of Iowa.

On Friday, Walker finally announced his long-delayed decision on the Menominee tribe's Kenosha casino plan. The governor said no, effectively killing the project.

On Saturday, Walker was in Des Moines along with other Republican presidential hopefuls for an audition at U.S. Rep. Steve King's "Iowa Freedom Summit."

Interesting timing.

A FEW WEEKS PRIOR the governor traveled to Las Vegas to meet with Republican mega-donor Sheldon Adelson — who gave \$650,000 to the Wisconsin Republican Party during last November's elections, and openly has let it be known he is shopping for a horse to back in the 2016 GOP primaries.

Adelson, owner of Las Vegas Sands Corp. and one of the richest gambling figures in the world, vigorously has opposed expanded gaming. He's on record saying the gaming market is saturated and expansions should only be considered in south Florida and Texas.

Did any of these situations influence the governor's decision on the Menominee's Hard Rock casino plan for Kenosha?

Was the decision delayed until after the November election for political reasons?

And, most importantly for our region, can anything be read into this as it might relate to the next project in the pipeline, the Ho-Chunk proposal to build a casino, hotel and entertainment complex in Beloit?

IT'S CERTAINLY FAIR to say Walker's decision regarding Kenosha won't do anything to increase confidence among Beloiters or the Ho-Chunk Nation.

Frankly, this doesn't pass the smell test. Saying no to Kenosha fits much too neatly into Walker's self-interest as he rapidly shifts his sights to the next campaign.

Keep in mind the Kenosha plan enjoyed overwhelming support in southeast Wisconsin, with the notable exception of the Potawatomi tribe which operates the off-reservation casino near downtown Milwaukee. The Kenosha plan had the support of local people, local governmental units and the state legislative delegation — both Democrats and Republicans. Assembly Minority Leader Peter Barca said the governor's signature on the plan could have triggered a \$1.6 billion investment over the next decade creating a projected 10,000 jobs.

“I can't help but wonder if the recent opposition of many Iowa conservative leaders played a role in the governor's decision,” Barca said in a news release. “If so, Gov. Walker has once again prioritized his own presidential ambitions over creating jobs and restoring economic opportunity in our state. The governor can no longer claim jobs and tourism are his top priorities, but perhaps pleasing Iowa conservatives are.”

SUPPORTERS OF THE Ho-Chunk plan for Beloit can find little to be encouraged about in Walker's Kenosha action.

But there is one difference. The Ho-Chunk compact with the state of Wisconsin contains a provision granting the tribe one more gaming facility, so there's at least a slim hope the governor and his legal team might recognize that clause if a Beloit plan ever hits his desk. Unfortunately, the odds probably just got longer that the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs will approve the Beloit plan as the agency did for Kenosha. If it appears the state's governor stands squarely against off-reservation gaming, why would the BIA bother?

In our view, Governor Walker was dead wrong about Kenosha, just as we believe he'd be wrong to kill the Beloit plan. Turning down this kind of investment and thousands of jobs is just plain hurtful to all the people who desperately need opportunities in Wisconsin.