

Menominee's latest attempt to get governor's casino OK fails

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Associated Press

FEBRUARY 19, 2015 | MADISON, WIS.

The Menominee Nation's latest attempt at persuading Gov. Scott Walker to change his mind and approve the tribe's plans for a Kenosha casino fell flat Wednesday after a police officer refused to let the tribal chairman into the governor's Capitol office.

The federal Bureau of Indian Affairs has given Walker until Thursday to finalize his decision, but the governor has shown no signs of budging. On Friday, tribal members started walking the 155 miles from their northeastern Wisconsin reservation to Madison, braving bitter cold to draw attention to their cause.

The trek ended Wednesday morning when they reached the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus, where busloads of other tribal members met them. Several hundred tribal members and supporters — some in full traditional dress — marched through downtown to the Capitol in minus 15-degree wind chills, yelling, playing drums and holding signs with messages such as "It's more than a casino, it's our future" and "Moving forward despite you."

Tribal members and supporters poured into the Capitol rotunda and cheered as Menominee Chairman Gary Besaw got on the public address system and asked Walker to show himself.

"Gov. Walker, please hear me," Besaw said. "I come to you today to speak to you. I represent the voices of our great Menominee Nation."

Besaw then walked to the governor's office. As a gaggle of reporters and television news crews looked on, a Capitol Police officer stopped him and told him no one was available to meet with him. Besaw said nothing for a moment, then thanked the officer and walked away. He told reporters he was dismayed and but still hoped Walker would have an epiphany overnight.

"We hope our songs open his heart," Besaw said.

The Menominee have been seeking to build a casino in Kenosha for years, hoping the facility would pull the tribe out of poverty. The federal government gave the tribe the go-ahead in 2013. But Walker, a Republican mulling a 2016 presidential run, holds the final say and earlier this month refused to green-light the project. He said approval could leave the state owing the Forest County Potawatomi hundreds of millions of dollars for infringing on that tribe's right to gambling exclusivity in southeastern Wisconsin.

The Menominee have proposed paying the state's share of a new Milwaukee Bucks arena as well as promising to cover the state's losses with a bond, but Walker has rejected those offers as well.

A Walker spokeswoman said in an email to The Associated Press on Wednesday that the governor's administration has studied the Menominee's plan extensively. Laurel Patrick said Department of Administration Secretary Mike Huebsch, Walker's top aide, met with Menominee officials at least 15 times. Walker also has met with tribal leaders, she said.

Menominee legislator Craig Corn said he walked every step of the 155 miles to Madison, spending 10 hours a day on the road. Saturday was the worst day, he said; wind chills dipped to 30 below.

"Even if (the casino) doesn't go, we stood up," Corn said. "We fight for what we believe in. We fight for the future of our kids. We didn't lie down."

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