

2 More Tribes, With Casinos, In Sight - Bureau Recommends U.S. Recognition For Easterns, Paucatucks

By Lyn Bixby - Courant Staff Writer

It looks as if Connecticut will get two more Indian casinos.

But that's not what the Eastern Pequots and the Paucatuck Eastern Pequots wanted to talk about Friday afternoon after receiving word that the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs had recommended that both groups receive federal recognition as tribes. Eastern Pequots Chairwoman Mary Sebastian wiped tears of joy from her eyes between telephone calls at her desk in the Eastern Pequot office on Route 2. ``We're elated," she said. ``We've worked so hard."

A little farther down Route 2, James Cunha, the treasurer of the Paucatuck Eastern Pequots, stepped out of his tribe's office into the late afternoon sun with a beaming smile.

``We're very excited," he said. ``It's overwhelming. It's been a long road."

Both offices are just a few miles from Foxwoods Resort Casino, the largest casino in the world, owned by the Mashantucket Pequots, the richest tribe in America.

While it's clear both tribes plan to join the casino club -- both have plans and financial backing -- tribal members did not want to talk about details, such as where the casinos might be built.

One place casinos apparently will not be built is on the 225-acre reservation where the two tribes have shared an uneasy peace for the past three decades. The Paucatucks have said they are opposed to development on the rocky reservation because it contains the graves of their ancestors.

While members of the two tribes celebrated, the mood at North Stonington Town Hall was subdued. North Stonington has joined with neighboring Ledyard and Preston in a long-running court battle to prevent the Mashantuckets from expanding their reservation, largely because reservations are exempt from local taxes and land use regulations. Now North Stonington officials fear a similar battle with two new tribes.

``We're very disappointed with the decision," said First Selectman Nicholas Mullane, ``and obviously we disagree with it."

Town officials will have an opportunity to challenge the recommended findings that the Easterns and Paucatucks deserve federal recognition because they are descended from Indian tribes who inhabited this area when the first European settlers arrived in the 1600s.

The recommended findings are followed by a 180-day public comment period. But the chances of overturning the findings appear slim at best. No recommendation of recognition has ever been reversed.

Mullane said he could not comment on the findings of the Bureau of Indian Affairs until he receives reports next week that explain the reasoning behind them.

Until the bureau's findings are released next week, neither side will know how the agency decided the complex and disputed historical and cultural issues involved in tribal status.

North Stonington officials hired genealogical consultants who concluded that neither the Easterns or the Paucatucks had Pequot ancestry. The consultants linked the Paucatucks, who are light-skinned, to the Narragansett Indians in Rhode Island and said the Easterns, who are mostly darker-skinned, are not descended from Indians.

For the Easterns the issue of ancestry centers on a woman they consider their matriarch, Tamer Brushel, who was born in the 1820s and died in 1915. On the matter of Brushel, the Paucatucks and the consultants reached a rare point of agreement -- that she was not a Pequot.

Although the Paucatucks have said the Easterns are not Pequots and they want nothing to do with them, Mary Sebastian has encouraged the Paucatucks to ``rejoin our tribe."

Cunha, during a brief conversation outside his tribe's office Friday afternoon, offered a public expression of congratulations to the Easterns.

The Eastern Pequots outnumber the Paucatucks 750 to 150, and both have wealthy financial backers who have been betting that their investments, helping to bankroll the tribes through the lengthy federal recognition process, will pay off through casino development.

The Easterns submitted the first version of their petition for recognition to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1989, and the Paucatucks followed in 1994.

Three years ago the Easterns entered into an alliance with Abraham Gosman, the chairman of Meditrust, the nation's largest health care real estate investment trust.

The Paucatucks' longtime financial backer is J.D. DeMatteo, the chairman of a Connecticut company, Amalgamated Industries Inc., and last year the tribe signed a deal with Donald Trump, the flamboyant real estate and casino tycoon.

Both tribes have refused to talk about where they would build casinos, which have proved to be a fast track to economic independence for the Mashantuckets and another nearby tribe, the Mohegans. The Mohegans opened their Mohegan Sun casino in Montville in 1996 and are in the midst of an \$800 million casino expansion project that will create the state's largest convention center.

Federal recognition makes tribes eligible for federal financial benefits and to negotiate with state governments to build casinos.

After opening Foxwoods in 1992, the Mashantuckets negotiated an agreement with former Gov. Lowell P. Weicker Jr. that gave them the exclusive right to operate slot machines in Connecticut in return for giving the state 25 percent of the revenue.

After the Mohegans achieved federal recognition, the Mashantuckets renegotiated the agreement to allow that tribe to operate slot machines.

Now the Mashantuckets and Mohegans and state officials will have to decide whether the Easterns and the Paucatucks may have slot machines and what the state's take will be.

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