

Pequots unify; State dreads casino

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By Jim Adams - Indian Country Today

LANTERN HILL RESERVATION, Conn. -- Leaders of the newly recognized Historic Eastern Pequot Nation are concentrating on forging a single government from two formerly feuding factions, leaving Connecticut politicians and financial backers to fret about the prospect of a future casino.

In an exclusive joint interview with Indian Country Today at the Lantern Hill Reservation pow wow grounds, Eastern Pequot Chairwoman Marcia Jones Flowers and Paucatuck Eastern Pequot Chairman James Cunha said that talk of a casino was premature until they had weathered the appeals process and received formal final recognition. It was the first interview either had granted since BIA head Neal McCaleb announced on July 24 that he had consolidated their separate petitions for recognition into a single recognized tribe.

Talk of a casino, said Cunha, was "putting the cart before the horse."

The harmony of the two leaders presented a remarkable shift from the clan feuding of the past, which split the Eastern Pequot tribe several decades ago and continued to the late stages of the petition process. But both Cunha and Flowers insisted the tribe was unified and demonstrated it by jointly leading the grand entry at the Eastern Pequot annual Pow wow July 28, along with Agnes Cunha and Roy Sebastian (Chief Hockeo), each tribe's leaders from the previous generation.

Although planning for a casino was temporarily on hold, Chief James Cunha left no doubt the tribe eventually meant to have one.

"We will be the next tribe in Connecticut to receive final federal recognition. We will be the next tribe in Connecticut to build a casino for all of our people," he said to cheers in a speech at the pow wow.

Since each faction received considerable financial support for its recognition effort, the backers are jockeying with more or less subtlety for their role in the final project. David Rosow, a golf and ski resort developer from Southport, Conn., who funded the Eastern Pequots, attended the intimate, invitation-only pow wow along with his 91-year-old father.

Cunha in his talk acknowledged the help of Connecticut businessman J.D. DeMatteo, who backed the Paucatucks for more than a decade, and Donald Trump, the Atlantic City mogul, who added his resources from 1999 on. "Trump made it possible to pay our council full-time salaries," Cunha said.

(Trump's statement in early August that he would sue if excluded from casino plans came as a surprise to Pequot leaders, Flowers said. She said Cunha had met with him the day before with no hint of the threat.)

The Pequot leaders are also anxiously watching to see if Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, a long-time legal opponent, files an appeal of their recognition. As of press time, he had not, but Flowers said he seemed to be leaning toward one.

Politicians in some of the state's small towns are also continuing to organize in opposition to a new casino, although sentiment in the much more populous industrial cities seems to run in favor of the potential economic benefit of Indian gaming. Leaders from 11 towns in the rural northeastern corner of the state are calling for an immediate moratorium on any BIA land-into-trust decisions. The

Northeastern Connecticut Council of Governments asked for a "time out" in a letter to U.S. Sens. Joseph I. Lieberman and Christopher Dodd, both Democrats, and U. S. Rep. Rob Simmons, R-2nd District.

The political impact on Simmons remains uncertain. Although the first-term Congressman unseated a Democratic incumbent by accusing him of complacency on Indian gaming, the issue is likely to be used against him in turn. Although the state's restrictive primary law had seemed to eliminate the harshly anti-Pequot author Jeff Benedict from the Democratic race, U.S. District Court Judge Peter Dorsey threw the contest open again with a ruling Aug. 5 ordering the state to open its September primary ballot to anyone filling out an eligibility form.

Dorsey had previously ruled that the state requirement of a minimum level of delegate support at a nominating convention was "overly burdensome" and probably unconstitutional.

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