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U.S.

Martha's Vineyard Casino Plan Divides Tribe

Some Aquinnah Wampanoag see electronic bingo as a potential economic engine, but others are skeptical



Julii Vanderhoop, owner of a bakery on Martha's Vineyard and member of the Aquinnah Wampanoag, opposes the casino plan and wants the tribe to explore other economic-development options. PHOTO: MATTHEW HEALEY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By **JON KAMP**

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MARTHA'S VINEYARD, Mass.—Plans to put electronic gambling machines in a community center here are dividing a Native American tribe, fraying relations with a local town and raising questions about whether a casino can work on this exclusive vacation island.

The roughly 90-square-mile Vineyard, located just south of Cape Cod, is home to about 17,000 people year-round and sees its population more than triple in the summertime, according to a local planning commission. The thickly wooded island has been a favorite spot for celebrities and presidents, including Barack Obama and his family.

But tucked in the western corner, far from the populous towns on the island's east side, is land that includes low-income housing and the shell of the unfinished community center belonging to the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah). Some tribal members want to add electronic bingo and similar games—not slot machines or table games like blackjack—to help expand federally supported social services, such as health care and day care, and add more housing.

Not everyone in the tribe backs the plan, however. Only about 300 of the tribe's estimated 1,300 members live on the Vineyard, with the rest in mainland Massachusetts

and elsewhere. Some island members say the casino push comes from mainlanders who want to reap financial rewards while foisting a gambling hall on locals.



The tribal members who want the casino received support in 2013 opinions from the U.S. Interior Department and the National Indian Gaming Commission, which said a federal law allows gambling on their land. Massachusetts disagreed, arguing the land is beholden to state and local law due to a 1983 settlement agreement ratified by Congress, and took the matter to court. A federal judge in Boston could rule on the dispute shortly after an Aug.

12 hearing, lawyers involved in the case said.

A 2011 state law that legalized casino gambling authorized up to four big commercial casinos, and the state has supported another tribe's push for a mainland casino, not the Vineyard plan.

Tensions escalated recently when the Vineyard tribe transferred control of the wooden-shingled community center to its casino corporation under tribal law and continued construction work on the long-vacant building. The casino could be open for business with 200 to 300 machines inside by year-end, according to the casino arm.

"The bottom line is that this is a way for us to improve our economic base for the tribal government," said Tobias Vanderhoop, the tribe's chairman. "It will allow us to provide services."

The casino push has damaged the tribe's relationship with Aquinnah, a town of about 300 that encompasses the tribal lands. Aquinnah sent the tribe a letter on July 6 demanding it halt the casino work because of a lack of permits, which the tribe said it didn't need. The town then asked the Boston federal court for an injunction or restraining order to stop work until the broader court ruling. The motion is set to be heard next week.



The unfinished community center where the tribe on Martha's Vineyard wants to build a casino. PHOTO: JON KAMP/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

A recent editorial in a Martha's Vineyard newspaper said the casino project isn't a good fit for the island and chastised the tribe for "indifference to its neighbors." Some objections are based on logistics, as it can take 45 minutes to reach Aquinnah via two-

lane, unlit roads from the populous towns across the island.

“You have to scratch your head and say who in their right mind is going to travel to the western edge of the island to play bingo?” said Adam Wilson, Aquinnah’s town administrator.

Former tribal chairwoman Beverly Wright said she raised signatures for another referendum next month to try to halt the casino, although prior tribal votes have supported the project. Juli Vanderhoop, the tribal chairman’s cousin and a town selectman in Aquinnah, wants the tribe to explore other economic-development options.

“What we’re about has never been about the bottom line, and I think that [the casino plan] brings an unknown to our people and an unhealthy element,” said Ms. Vanderhoop, who runs a bakery with an outdoor stone oven at her home in the town.



A cyclist rides past the entrance to the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) lands. PHOTO: MATTHEW HEALEY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“It’s a huge, dividing issue,” said Jason Widdiss, a 37-year-old who lives in tribal housing near the would-be casino with his girlfriend and four children. A wampum artist with a local jewelry shop, he said he would rather see a community center with activities for children.

Cheryl Andrews-Maltais, who heads the Aquinnah Wampanoag Gaming Corp., is a driving force behind the casino. She lives on the Vineyard but was raised on the mainland and said tribal members off island provided the critical mass to secure federal recognition for the tribe in 1987.

But those members are beyond reach of most social services without more funding, said Ms. Andrews-Maltais, who characterized tribal opponents as a vocal minority. “I’ve lost enough elders in our community that shouldn’t have gone to their grave” without access to those services, she said.

She noted the casino is considered temporary, to test the market, and the tribe is making overtures to island businesses that might help send gamblers their way. Despite the summertime glamour, she said the tribe and the island need a year-round economic engine for residents.

“Most people think Martha’s Vineyard only hosts very rich and very famous people,” she said. “That couldn’t be farther from the truth.”

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