

Conyers, Dingell Gaming Dispute to Be Settled on House Floor

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By Susan Crabtree

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House Democratic leaders have brokered a deal to bring to the floor next week a contentious Indian gaming bill that has pitted two powerful Democratic committee chairmen against one another.

For months, Judiciary Committee Chairman John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.) and Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman John Dingell (D-Mich.) have been clashing over two bills that would settle tribal land disputes and allow two new Indian casinos to be built near Detroit. Next week, they will settle their differences on the House floor.

The deal would allow the two tribal land dispute bills that Dingell supports to be voted on on the floor, but would also give Conyers an amendment, according to sources tracking the measures. The amendment apparently would direct the Department of Justice (DoJ) and possibly the Department of the Interior to review the land claims — a difficult and likely unsuccessful process Dingell and other supporters have attempted to avoid by seeking congressional approval of the legislation.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and other Democratic leaders are in a politically difficult spot.

They have decided to allot precious floor time for measures that will pave the way for Indian casinos during the first election year after the fall of Jack Abramoff, whose lobbying practices involving tribes and gambling helped propel Democrats into power in 2006.

Opponents of the new casinos, including a diverse bipartisan group headed by Conyers, as well as Rep. Carolyn Kilpatrick (D-Mich.), believe the land claims are illegitimate and will not survive a review by those federal agencies.

Conyers, who opposes gambling on principle, also worries that the new casinos will undermine existing gambling operations that are a major source of tax revenue for cash-strapped Detroit. He and Kilpatrick, the chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), represent Detroit, but are enlisting the help of other gambling opponents such as Rep. Mike Rogers (R-Mich.). They are making the case that the land claims will set a dangerous precedent for Indian tribes and casino interests across the country.

Dozens of lobbying groups on both sides of the issue are pouring money and resources into a final push to persuade lawmakers on the issue.

In April, a casino developer behind the push to settle the land claims through an act of Congress hired Rick Alcalde, a lobbyist implicated in the uproar over a disputed \$10 million earmark sponsored by Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska) for an interchange at Coconut Road along Interstate 75 in Florida.

MJM Enterprises, a company owned by Mike Malik, a casino developer who wants the land disputes settled so he can build a casino in Port Huron, Mich., hired Alcalde in the middle of a public call for a DoJ investigation into the Coconut Road earmark that was taking place in the Senate, lobbying records show.

Alcalde is one of Young's group of "A-list" lobbyists, on which The Hill reported in Thursday's issue.

On the other side of the issue, MGM, a major casino presence in Las Vegas, is furiously lobbying against the passage of the two settlement claims because it wants to protect a Detroit casino it built just a few years ago.

The Port Huron casino would help boost the economy in that area, and its congresswoman, Rep. Candice Miller (R-Mich.), has spent years trying to resolve the land dispute claim so her district can have a casino and compete with a Canadian gambling operation located right across the border. Miller and Dingell, whose district would also get a casino out of the deal in the town of Romulus, argue that denying their areas the economic boon the gaming establishments would provide is unfair and motivated by greed.

Conyers, along with Rogers, sent a letter to colleagues Thursday, urging them to reject what they regard as an unprecedented expansion of "off-reservation" Indian gambling. The tribes want the rights to land some 350 miles from their reservations so they can open the casinos in locations where they're likely to attract more customers, along the border and near Detroit.

Fifty-three House members signed Conyers's letter, including 22 members of the CBC and 16 Republicans.

"The tribes' effort to bypass the regular application process is particularly audacious considering the level of opposition these casino proposals face," Conyers argued. "The Department of the Interior, the Judiciary Committee and the voters of the state of Michigan have all strongly rejected efforts to sidestep the established approval process."

The letter also stressed that the bills would change the way casinos are approved by allowing Congress to wade into a land dispute that the Department of the Interior routinely determines.

Dingell, a 27-term veteran of the House and its longest-serving member, has joined forces with Natural Resources panel Chairman Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.) and Young, the panel's ranking member, along with a bipartisan group of Michigan lawmakers, to push for the bills.

Rahall's committee approved the measures by a wide margin earlier this year, but Conyers followed with a lopsided vote against them in the Judiciary Committee arguing against

Congress's intervention in the matter. Conyers used that Judiciary Committee stamp of disapproval to convince Democratic leaders to give him an amendment, and he hopes it helps stir opposition once it reaches the House floor for a full vote.

Miller also has sent out "Dear Colleague" letters to members.

The land settlement claims, she said, were hashed out by former Michigan Gov. John Engler (R) and approved by the current governor, Jennifer Granholm (D). The newest deal, which Granholm signed off on, would increase the state's share of gaming revenues by as much as \$30 million a year.

She said both Democratic senators from Michigan, Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow, support the legislation, although she did not mention that Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.), who represents gambling-rich Las Vegas, opposes it.

"This is purely greed," she said of her opponents' motivation. "It's not based on any real anti-gambling philosophy. They're just trying to protect MGM's interests."