

Study: Local casino would aid tribe Menominees say revenue is necessary for them to thrive

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A recent study by a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor says a Kenosha casino would help to reverse many of the negative effects that the Menominee Nation has suffered since the federal government terminated the tribe in the 1950s.

The report, commissioned and paid for by the tribe, was submitted to the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs in response to questions about the proposed casino's effects on the tribe's unmet needs, a project spokesman said Thursday.

Dennis Dresang, a professor in the UW-Madison's La Follette School of Public Affairs, wrote that revenue from the Kenosha casino would make "a significant, measurable difference for the Menominee in their struggle to overcome the shattering economic and cultural aftereffects of termination."

Without the revenue, Dresang said, the tribe's ability to care for its nearly 8,500 members is severely compromised.

Casino project spokesman Evan Zeppos said he did not want to surmise how the government will respond to the report, but he said he believes putting the continuing negative effects of the tribe's termination into context could be helpful for the regulatory staff.

"I do know that having this kind of objective, credible information from a group of people who are independent is helpful," Zeppos said.

In 1954, the federal government used its then-new policy of termination on the Menominee, eliminating the tribe as a political entity, deeding away its northern Wisconsin reservation land and declaring its members non-Indian, making them ineligible for many government programs.

Dresang's report states the Menominee were made eligible for termination not as a punishment, but because of the tribe's relative success at the time.

The results, he said, quickly proved harmful.

After the termination, which took effect in 1961, the newly created Menominee County — still the state's poorest — struggled to fund state-mandated services, Dresang wrote. After years of lobbying by the tribe and the state, the federal government restored tribal recognition to the Menominee in 1973.

Dresang said the effects of the 12-year termination period still linger.

The tribe lost revenue-gaining sources during that time, including a hospital and power utility that serviced the reservation and the surrounding region. Dresang said reservation residents also continue to struggle with funding the programs required of it as a county.

Dresang said the effects of termination struck him as a key issue when the tribe approached him to conduct a study of unmet needs.

"As soon as the conversations began, that immediately jumped out at me as, 'Gee, this is an obvious threshold issue,'" Dresang said in an interview.

The report concludes with recommendations that the tribe and federal, state and local governments collaborate to develop the Kenosha casino, a project now estimated to cost roughly \$1 billion.

With the revenue it would generate, Dresang suggests the tribe make a variety of its improvements on the reservation, concerning education, infrastructure and other issues.

Dresang also suggests that the tribe link educational programs to employment at the Kenosha casino and include facilities and activities in Kenosha to serve tribal members living in southeastern Wisconsin and northern Illinois.

The proposed casino continues to await a recommendation from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Zeppos hesitated to speculate on when that ruling will come, though he said he does not expect it within the next month.

Dresang said the government has appeared hesitant to approve off-reservation casinos in the years since casino lobbyist Jack Abramoff was convicted for corruption and defrauding tribes. But, he said, the Menominee could be viewed through a different lens.

"I think that one of the major things that they've got going for them is that recognition that this termination is a kind of unique, special circumstance, and maybe (the government) ought to act kind of differently," Dresang said.