

By FRANK ELTMAN (AP) – 2 hours ago

GARDEN CITY, N.Y. — A small eastern Long Island Indian tribe seeking federal recognition since the 1970s declared victory Friday after an Interior Department appeals panel rejected a pair of challenges to its application.

The decision, which found the

challengers lacked legal standing in the case, clears the way for the Shinnecock Indians to proceed with plans to open a casino at a still-to-be-determined site on Long Island, and makes tribal members eligible for federal benefits.

"We're very pleased that the judges have had the wisdom to see through the charade; clearly they have done that," said Randy King, chairman of the Shinnecock Indians board of trustees. "Now the hard work of the nation starts; the work of building for the future. It's going to be challenging, but exciting."

Mark Tilden, an attorney representing the Shinnecoeks in the recognition bid, said the Interior Board of Indian Appeals ruling is effective immediately, making the Southampton-based tribe the 565th to be formally recognized by the United States government.

"Today is a very jubilant day for the nation," Tilden said. "This ruling firmly establishes them among the family of Indian nations and tribes within the United States."

The Shinnecoeks were told in June that the Interior Department had approved their application for federal recognition, pending a 30-day comment period. But a group called the Connecticut Coalition for Gaming Jobs and a faction of the Montauk Indian tribe — also on eastern Long Island — separately filed papers opposing the recognition.

The Interior Department appeals panel ruled Friday, however, that neither group had legal standing to file challenges.

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In its 13-page ruling, the appeals panel wrote that the coalition had not identified a business or individual as a member, providing no proof that any member is an "interested party." The panel also noted that the Montauk faction, which has acknowledged common ancestry with the Shinnecocks, lacked similar standing.

A coalition representative said a comment would be issued later Friday; an attorney for the Montauk group did not answer a telephone call and did not provide an answering service.

A coalition representative said last summer the Shinnecocks should be rejected because they have received financial backing from a Michigan casino operator in the past. Detroit-based Gateway Casino Resorts backed a \$920,000 lobbying effort by the Shinnecocks between 2004 and 2008, according to data from a government watchdog group, the Center for Responsive Politics.

Tribal representatives said then that the source of their financing was immaterial to the recognition issue.

Federal recognition is required for any Indian tribe seeking to operate a casino. Tribal members are also eligible for scholarships and other federal aid when recognition is granted.

King said Friday the tribe continues to study various locations for a casino, but that no site has been selected.

He acknowledged that an agreement still needs to be completed with the state of New York before any dice can begin rolling. Among the locations being discussed are the site of the current Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Uniondale, and Brookhaven Airport Calabro Airport in Shirley.

"Hopefully, the state of New York will entertain a meeting with the nation in the near future," he said.

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