

Written by Administrator
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FRUITPORT TOWNSHIP — The new year will bring an assortment of new players at the state level to the negotiating table over the proposed American Indian casino in Muskegon County.

And just because the proposal has been delayed for months awaiting potential action by the state House of Representatives doesn't

mean the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians has given up on its plans to construct a casino-center development on the former site of the Great Lakes Downs racetrack along Harvey Street in Fruitport Township.

With Republican Rick Snyder poised to become governor and many new state representatives joining the state Legislature this month, several key decision-makers likely lack the familiarity with the proposal of those who were briefed during the 2010 legislative session.

Robert Memberto, the Little River Band's commerce director, said the tribe is preparing to work with the new state officials.

"We have reached out to Snyder's chief of staff," Memberto said of Dennis Muchmore, who was appointed chief of staff in November. "When we get into January, we want to sit down and talk. We look forward to working with him."

Tribal officials, along with some local governmental leaders, have pushed for passage of legislation that would allow the tribe to construct an off-reservation casino in Muskegon County. The legislation, concurring with an agreement to amend the tribe's current casino compact signed by Gov. Jennifer Granholm and tribal Ogema Larry Romanelli, is needed as part of the state approval.

The legislation stalled this year in the Legislature.

One of the issues that will need to be determined is the status of the compact amendment signed in March by Granholm. It is unclear if Snyder's signature will be required and, if so, will

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he support such a proposal.

During his campaign for governor, Snyder told The Chronicle that he's not a "real fan of casino gambling" and believes the state's upcoming renegotiation of casino compacts with existing tribal casinos is more important.

The last time a proposed casino was in limbo during a state administration shift came at the end of 2002 when then-Gov. John Engler would not sign the Gun Lake casino compact because of conflict-of-interest accusations. However, he urged Granholm, who took office in 2003, to sign the compact. Following several issues, including legal challenges, the casino in Allegan County's Wayland Township received its final approvals early in 2009 and is set to open in February.

Before the proposed Fruitport Township casino can be built, federal action also is needed. The U.S. Department of Interior must sign off on the compact amendments and the tribe would need to ask the department to take 60 acres of land into trust for the casino.

[The artist renderings, called "very preliminary"](#) by the tribe, were released in early November. The conceptual site plan calls for several noncasino buildings, including retail shops, hotels, a larger anchor retail facility and a theater laid out around a pedestrian main street. The proposed casino would feature 1,700 slot machines and 30 table games and more than 700 employees.

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