

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — A Native American tribe's plan to build a \$25 million casino in the Oklahoma Panhandle hundreds of miles from the tribe's headquarters has prompted a state senator to question whether tribal gambling should be allowed in areas that have no historical tribal connections.

The Shawnee Tribe has proposed a 42,000-square-foot casino near Guymon, 366 miles away from the tribe's headquarters in Miami in far northeastern Oklahoma. Supporters say the proposed Golden Mesa Casino will create 175 jobs and draw visitors from the Texas Panhandle, New Mexico, Colorado and Kansas.

But Republican Sen. Bryce Marlatt of Woodward said Friday that allowing tribal casinos on land with no historical tribal ties could prompt state leaders to re-examine whether tribes have the exclusive right to casino operations and may consider open gambling to anyone.

He added that the tribe has no more connection to Oklahoma's Panhandle than multinational corporations that operate resorts and hotels in Las Vegas.

"If we are going to expand gambling anywhere in the state, perhaps we should look at who the best operators of such facilities really are and whether they would agree to terms that would provide the state more revenue for critical needs like teacher pay," Marlatt said.

Historically, the government has required Oklahoma-based tribes to build casinos within their tribal jurisdictions. But in 2000, Congress enacted the Shawnee Act, restoring the tribe's federal recognition and giving it the right to secure land outside the assigned lands of other Oklahoma tribes. Those lands include the Oklahoma Panhandle and some land within Oklahoma County, where previous proposals to operate gambling facilities were rejected.

Shawnee Tribe spokesman Brent Gooden said that unlike other tribes, the Shawnee Tribe is based in what is essentially the territory of another tribal government, limiting it in terms of land and economic development and forcing it to look for economic opportunities in other areas.

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The federal Bureau of Indian Affairs is considering the tribe's request to place land in the far western Oklahoma Panhandle that was purchased by the 2,500-member tribe into trust to allow for building a casino.

Marlatt said he is also concerned about the social problems associated with gambling, including addiction.

But Michael Shannon, executive director of the Panhandle Regional Economic Development Coalition, said the organization supports the casino proposal in its effort to make the region more economically diverse.

"It's our mission to help make our economy sustainable," Shannon said. "Adding tourism and more jobs to our area — yes, we're for that."

The Panhandle's economy is based on agriculture and energy production, areas that have experienced economic declines in recent years, Shannon said, adding, "Rural America is taking a pretty good hit right now."

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