

A maverick tribal casino that opened near Gaylord has created a jackpot of controversy in the Michigan gaming world.

Regulators and state officials say the Bay Mills Indian Community opened the Bay Mills Resort Casino in the village of Vanderbilt last week without going through

the normal approval channels. With just 38 slot machines, it's a small-time operation, but if the tribe can successfully argue that it has legal cause to operate, it could open the floodgates to more casinos in the state and more competition for their revenue.

State and federal officials hope to meet with tribal leaders this week, said Joy Yearout, a spokeswoman for state Attorney General Mike Cox.

Officials at Bay Mills didn't return phone calls seeking comment, but said on the tribe's Web site, www.baymills.org, that they were acting lawfully. Tribal Chairman Jeff Parker said on the Web site that he looks forward to meeting leaders from other tribes, as well as state officials.

The tribe, which has a casino in Brimley in the Upper Peninsula, has been trying for years to open a casino in Port Huron and had a bill in Congress in 2008 that would have made it possible, said Larry Rosenthal, a partner in Ietan Consulting, a Washington, D.C., firm that specializes in American Indian gaming issues. The bill never passed, but the tribe recently purchased property in Port Huron that is viewed as a prime spot for a casino.

"It's my belief that they are using Vanderbilt to get to Port Huron," Rosenthal said. "What they lost in Congress, they are trying to get in the courts."

The operators of Detroit's three casinos, which could face increased competition if the tribe's legal theory is upheld, wouldn't comment on the opening. But Indian tribes that operate other casinos in Michigan are calling for "swift and immediate action to close this illegal gaming operation."

Rosenthal acknowledged that he is consulting for some of the tribes that oppose the casino. He formerly worked as an aide to Congressman Dale Kildee, a Flint Democrat, and helped draft the language in the Michigan Indian Land Claims Settlement Act of 1997.

The tribe hasn't spelled out its legal theory. Rosenthal said he suspects the tribe may try to argue that because the property was purchased with money from a land claim settlement, it becomes Indian land eligible for gaming.

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