

Connecticut tribes receive federal go-ahead for casino

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Connecticut's two federally recognized tribes have received long-awaited approval from the federal government to push ahead with plans for an off-reservation casino in East Windsor.

The Mashantucket Pequot and the Mohegans, which created the joint venture MMCT, can now "move forward with construction on Tribal Winds Casino" along Interstate 91, Rodney Butler, chairman of the Mashantucket Pequot, said Thursday.

The venue was originally supposed to open before MGM Resorts opened its casino in Springfield, Massachusetts, last August in the hopes of blunting competition from the newcomer.

But those plans were stymied by the U.S. Department of Interior, which had refused to sign off on amended agreements required by a 2017 state law authorizing the casino project, which has been billed by the tribes as a way to help protect jobs at their existing Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods Resort Casino. A federal investigation is under way into the delay and former Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke's actions. Zinke has dismissed the allegations as politically motivated.

A memo posted by the U.S. Department of Interior says the agency's assistant secretary of Indian affairs Tuesday approved proposed amendments to two documents, including the memorandum of understanding with the state of Connecticut.

"Now that the approval of our Amendment is secured and our exclusivity agreement with the State of Connecticut is reaffirmed, we will move forward with construction on Tribal Winds Casino in East Windsor and preserve much needed jobs and revenue," Butler said.

The decision comes amid debate at the state Capitol over whether to scrap the required federal approval in order to allow the East Windsor project to move forward, or to create a competitive

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bidding process for a new casino, possibly in Bridgeport. The latter could risk the state's 25 percent share of slot machine revenues from the two casinos, which amount to about \$270 million annually, and were part of a deal granting the two tribes exclusive rights to certain forms of gambling.

The General Assembly's Public Safety Committee earlier this week advanced two dueling bills that would scrap the federal approval requirement and create a bidding process.

"Tribal Winds is now approved, and I look forward to the ribbon-cutting and the jobs it will bring to central Connecticut," said state Senator Cathy Osten, D-Sprague, who has pushed for the legislation bypassing the Department of Interior process. "I always thought this decision was just a matter of time, I just didn't know how much time it would take."

MGM has legally challenged the state's ability to give the tribes exclusive rights to casino gambling off their reservations. A message seeking comment was left with MGM.

Democratic Gov. Ned Lamont's spokeswoman, Maribel La Luz, said the administration is pleased with the federal agency's decision, which she said ensures no harm will be done to the state's existing revenue-sharing agreements.

"We remain committed to working with the tribes toward a global resolution of all outstanding legal issues or obstacles that may arise out of this decision, including any lawsuits third parties may bring against the state law that now authorizes MMCT to operate a commercial casino in East Windsor," she said.

Earlier this year, tribal leaders said they have spent about \$14 million so far on the \$300 million project. The site has been purchased and cleared; most state and local approvals have been obtained; and a project labor agreement has been reached with the construction unions, they said.

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