

Cowlitz tribe's gamble: Campaign to keep rivals to Ilani casino at bay raises questions

Written by Administrator

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Since 2016, the Cowlitz Indian Tribe has paid millions to a Portland consulting firm and its owners to protect its highly successful [Ilani Casino Resort](#) from unwanted competition — namely other tribes looking to expand their gaming operations in Oregon.

Ilani became the nearest casino to Portland when [it opened in 2017](#) outside La Center, Washington, and it now boasts annual revenue of at least \$300 million a year, according to one estimate.

Gaming is vital to Northwest tribal economies and, in this case, access to the highly lucrative gambling market in Oregon's population center was at stake.

Cowlitz leaders turned to consultants Matthew Rossman and Bruce Studer and their company — best known for a nearly two-decade quest to build the state's first private, non-tribal casino over the objections of tribes in Oregon. At the urging of an influential tribal leader, the late David Barnett, the tribe entered into a contract paying from \$30,000 to \$50,000 a month to R&S Strategy Group or its owners, Rossman and Studer.

Editor's note

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. A future installment will explore a lawsuit in Washington state that could upend tribal gaming and, experts say, threaten the U.S. government's recognition of tribal sovereignty.

According to a copy of the agreement and records of tribal meetings, as well as interviews with Rossman, the tribe aimed to stave off competitors, particularly the [Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde](#) and the [Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians in Oregon](#).

Gaming dollars have been transformative for some tribes, funding various social programs. Casinos also have made some players in the business extremely wealthy. And few pursued the tribal gaming motherlode as aggressively as Barnett, who died in May at age 61.

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Barnett's father was a tribal chair who led the Cowlitz to securing federal recognition, and the younger Barnett played key roles in securing the tribe's land and getting ilani built. He, too, was elected in 2020 as chair of the tribe's general council, its top leadership post.

Barnett brokered a series of agreements between the tribe and Rossman and Studer, or at times with their company, R&S Strategy Group. Documents outline the arrangement in broad strokes, saying they would work to protect the ilani from competitors without specifying how.

The agreements included a clause that forbade the would-be casino developers from moving forward with a private casino that would compete with ilani. And if the pair did develop a casino, the Cowlitz tribe would have the option to manage it for them.

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