

Florida Nears Deal on Indian Gaming

Tallahassee, Florida (AP) – Republican Gov. Charlie Crist and the Seminole Indians are close to a deal allowing the tribe's casinos to offer Las Vegas-style slot machines – possibly even card games – with the potential to generate more than USD 100 million a year for the state.

Crist, who took office in January, has made progress in negotiations with the tribe, unlike his predecessor, Gov. Jeb Bush. Bush adamantly opposed gambling and was at an impasse in talks when he left office.

Both sides told the U.S. Interior Department during a 90 minute meeting that they are in agreement on major issues and that a compact should be ready within a week to 10 days, said George Skibine, director of Bureau for Indian Affairs gaming office.

„A lot more progress has been made under this administration,“ Skibine said. „We felt very happy with the progress that both the state and the tribe are making.“

The governor is trying to work out an agreement that provides the state a significant amount of money while weighing concerns about new gambling. Crist faces pressure from some conservative Republicans not to give the tribe anything it isn't entitled to under federal law.

Florida is facing budget cuts and lawmakers are trying to schedule a special session to cut USD 1.5 billion in state spending. Crist, though, said that is not a factor in the talks.

„I want to do it if it's good for Florida,“ Crist said. „We're trying to get the best opportunity for the taxpayers of our

state.“

The state is forced to negotiate a compact that will allow the Seminoles to, at the very least, replace their video slot machines with the real thing at facilities like the Hard Rock casinos in Hollywood and Tampa.

That's because voters two years ago approved Vegas-style slots in Broward County, jai-alai frontons and horse and dog tracks. Federal law allows Indian tribes to have the same type of gambling that is allowed elsewhere in a state.

But the state can't receive revenue from the tribe unless it agrees to a compact that gives the Seminoles some other sort of benefit, such as additional games not allowed elsewhere in Florida or a guarantee that the state won't allow competing games within a certain geographic region around the casinos.

While Broward County in southeast Florida already has Vegas-style slots, the compact could generate state revenue, for example, if Tampa Bay-area tracks are not allowed slot machines – Vegas-style or video.

Crist has already said he will not allow the Seminoles to run games like roulette or craps, but he hasn't ruled out card games like blackjack or baccarat, said Barry Richard, a lawyer representing the tribe.

He said major points of the deal have been worked out, and if it stands as the tribe expects, the state will see USD 50 million when the compact is signed and an average annual income far in excess of USD 100 million.

„These projections are not pie in the sky, they're based upon actual historic numbers,“ Richard said.

But some conservative Republicans say they don't care about the extra money if it means more gambling.

„We believe the aim of the negotiations should be to agree to

the bare minimum amount of gambling to which the Tribe is entitled under the law. Instead of maximizing revenue, we want to minimize the inevitable social harm associated with expanded tribal gambling," House Speaker Marco Rubio and other Republican House leaders said in a letter this week to Crist.

Rubio and Republican Senate President Ken Pruitt also contend that a compact must be approved by the Legislature. Richard has said that is not the case and Crist has acknowledged there is a difference of opinion.