

Report: Tribal leaders in Florida spent millions in casino income

Fort Lauderdale, Florida (AP) – Leaders of the Seminole Tribe of Florida – the first U.S. tribe to offer high-stakes gambling – have spent millions of dollars from the group's vast casino income on themselves and their relatives, according to a report.

The spending has triggered audits by federal regulators and complaints among Seminoles that the gambling profits benefit certain members at the expense of the rest of the tribe, the South Florida Sun-Sentinel reported Sunday after a review of thousands of pages of tribal documents including audits, budgets and Tribal Council resolutions.

Phil Hogen, chairman of the National Indian Gaming Commission, which regulates tribal spending of gambling profits, told the Sun-Sentinel that the spending practices „cry out for some inquiry, and they will receive that.“

Each of the tribe's almost 3,400 members receives about USD 120,000 annually in profits from Seminole enterprises, mostly casinos. However, since 2000, Tribal Council members have spent more than USD 280 million from discretionary funds they control on travel, lavish homes, luxury vehicles, boxing rings, basketball courts and even cosmetic surgery, the newspaper said.

Under the federal Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, tribes can spend gambling profits only in five broad categories, including government services and „for the general welfare of the tribe.“ Spending on individual members must be through programs such as housing and recreation, with criteria typically tied to financial need, the newspaper said.

Council member Max Osceola Jr. said leaders and their families have received the same assistance available to all Seminoles.

„I'm responsible for every Seminole member," Osceola said. „It's not who my blood family is, it's not who my clan is. It's the 3,320 Seminoles I'm responsible for."

The Seminoles recently purchased the Hard Rock International hotel and restaurant chain for nearly USD 1 billion. They also recently signed a 25-year agreement with the state that will allow it to offer Las Vegas-style slot machines, blackjack and baccarat at its six casinos.

The Seminoles opened their first gambling enterprise, a bingo hall, in 1979. By 2005, members of the Tribal Council were overseeing a USD 1 billion-a-year empire.