

Republican opposition eases to Seminole casino compact as USD 60 million sit in limbo

Tallahassee – Florida's multibillion-dollar budget deficit is forcing Republican legislative leaders to reconsider their opposition to a deal that Gov. Charlie Crist struck last year to expand tribal gambling.

Officials for the Seminole Tribe of Florida have met over the past several weeks with new House Speaker Ray Sansom, R-Destin, and other legislators to kick-start talks on a compact that gave the tribe the right to install Las Vegas-style slots and blackjack tables at its seven casinos in the state.

Florida already has received USD 60 million from the compact, but it's being held in a reserve account because Republican legislators, including Sansom, successfully challenged the agreement in the Florida Supreme Court.

The court ruled in July that Crist overstepped his authority by signing the deal without legislative approval, but the Seminoles already had installed blackjack tables and Vegas-style slots at their Tampa and Hollywood casinos. The table games are outlawed in Florida by a constitutional ban on casino gambling.

Tribal attorneys maintain they have the authority to operate the games under federal law because the U.S. Department of the Interior approved the Seminoles' compact with Crist before the state court ruled.

But what seems to have revived negotiations are provisions that would pay the state USD 227 million over the next 19 months. With the state looking at a USD 2.1 billion deficit in this year's budget, and as much as USD 5.8 billion in the

budget year that begins July 1, the money is especially attractive.

„Our budget situation does expedite it,“ said Sansom, who has been a vocal critic of expanding gambling. He even issued a statement in September backing up a request sent to the National Indian Gaming Commission by Attorney Bill McCollum, asking it to shut down the tribe’s table games and slots.

Now that stance has softened a bit.

„It’s just not an issue you can ignore because it’s sitting right there,“ Sansom said.

While he doesn’t view tribal payments as a solution for this year’s funding gap, Sansom added, „it’s fair to say this is going to be part of the discussion“ for next year’s budget.