

Bill would allow tribal gambling

Austin, Texas – American Indian tribes in Texas are trying again to reopen their casinos with legislation filed Tuesday that would provide a defense to prosecution for tribes that operate limited casino gambling.

Rep. Norma Chavez, an El Paso Democrat, filed a bill that would allow the Tigua tribe in El Paso and the Alabama-Coushatta tribe near Livingston to reopen casinos that were closed by court orders when the state opposed them. The tribes say they need the money generated from gambling for health care, education and other tribal necessities.

„We have seen success,“ said Carlos Hisa, lieutenant governor for the Tigua tribe, the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo of El Paso. He’s been at the Capitol for previous legislative sessions to ask that the tribe be allowed to resume its revenue-producing poker and bingo-style gaming. „Hopefully we can get it done this year.“

Chavez filed similar legislation two years ago, but that bill died on a rare tie vote of 66-66 in the Texas House. This time, the House is more closely divided with a 76-74 Republican majority and presumably more votes for Indian casino legislation, Chavez said.

The prospects in the GOP-controlled Senate are less clear, and Republican Gov. Rick Perry said again Tuesday through his spokeswoman that he doesn’t want to expand the footprint of gambling in the state. Texas’ social conservative Republicans – a reliable voting bloc for Perry – generally oppose gambling legislation. Perry is battling the more moderate U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison in the 2010 Republican gubernatorial primary.

Chavez said she hopes the Tiguas don’t get caught in

„political crossfire“ over gambling between Perry and Hutchison.

Hutchison also has previously denounced the spread of gambling in Texas.

The tribes argue that because Texas created a state-run lottery it opened the door for Indian casino gambling on federally recognized tribal lands.

The Tiguas operated their Speaking Rock Casino from 1993-2001. The tribe has said it produced USD 60 million annually for the tribe's members. The Alabama-Coushatta ran their East Texas casino for only nine months before it was closed in 2002, generating USD 1 million per month.

Currently the Kickapoo tribe in Eagle Pass is the only one of the three Texas tribes operating a limited casino. It is governed by the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act – not the more restrictive Restoration Act that applies to the Alabama-Coushatta and Tiguas – according to the Texas Attorney General's Office.

Meanwhile, Sens. Rodney Ellis, D-Houston, and John Carona, R-Dallas, are expected to soon put forth another large casino gambling bill that would allow non-Indian destination casinos to operate in certain parts of the state. Indian casinos are expected to be covered in that bill again as well. The same legislation died in 2007.

Some members of the El Paso legislative delegation say they hope the omnibus casino bill is viewed as a possible revenue generator for the state. Chavez said she and the Tiguas will support all bills that allow for the reopening of the tribe's casino. Tigua tribal members and others from El Paso spent Tuesday meeting with newly appointed legislative committee chairmen.

Suzii Paynter, director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life

Commission, which opposes casino gambling, said money spent on gambling pulls revenue from existing local economies. She said Chavez's „defense to prosecution“ bill acknowledges that the gambling it seeks is illegal. And, Paynter said, a provision of the bill could allow other Indian tribes besides the three with reservations in Texas to enter the state and try to set up casinos based on their historical ties to Texas.

„It's like the most wide-open gate that you can open,“ she said.

She and others opposed to more gambling in Texas point out these are troubling times for the casino business nationally and that the three Atlantic City casinos once run by Donald Trump sought bankruptcy protection Tuesday.

But in El Paso, city and county leaders support reopening the Tigua casino, which they say was a big economic generator for the area.

Rep. Joe Moody, D-El Paso, said Texans are simply leaving to spend their gambling dollars across the state line in New Mexico.

„We see lots of Texas license plates that head over that way every day, every night,“ Moody said. „It's about fairness, and it's about the economy.“