



PATAKI GAMBLING ON OUR SAFETY

Concerns About Upstate Tribe Casino Deal Worsen

Michael M. Martino Jr. 11/16/2006

For some reason, guarding the Canadian border does not seem to be a priority to the American public when it comes to the question of Homeland Security. But it is well-documented that guns, drugs, terrorists and illegal immigrants have poured over the border for years.

Yet in the rhetoric and pontification about border security, there is never mention of building walls across that border, and instead attention is drawn to Mexico. But by the end of the month, Gov. George Pataki may be casting a vote against protecting New York State, if he decides to grant the Saint Regis Mohawk tribe rights to construct a casino in Monticello, N.Y. It is a curious decision for a man who has aspirations to run for president in 2008. Many claim that the tribe has abused its powers as a nation, using the argument that the reservation straddles both the U.S. and Canadian borders for illicit purposes. The tribe already owns and operates two casinos Upstate, the Akwesasne Mohawk Casino and Mohawk Bingo Palace.

The Monticello proposal has elicited impassioned pleas from local elected officials.

“The claims of the sovereign immunity by the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe have prevented both U.S. and New York State authorities from securing this area in Upstate New York, which has made it a very easy access point for drug trafficking,” writes Assemb. Andrew Raia (R-Northport) to Pataki, in a letter dated Oct. 24, of this year, and obtained by the Press. “Drug trafficking activities have been well-documented in this area, and it’s only a matter of time before their reservation serves as the doorway for a terrorist attack.” Pataki’s office did not return calls to the Press.

Raia suggests that no new casino deal should be made with the tribe until U.S. authorities are allowed to patrol the reservation.

That would be a good idea, says one source close to the 12,000-member Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe. Smuggling is the preferred profession of some tribal members, and they are not shy about their lavish lifestyles. If someone is a member of a federally recognized tribe, he or she cannot borrow money from a bank to build a home or business. All the money is generated by the tribe. Therefore, cash is king, which makes smuggling a logical career path for some.

“Generations have lived off of smuggling,” says the source. “It’s their jobs. There is no fear of getting caught.”

The reservation is a combined 22,048 square acres. Part of its land is in Canada, while the rest lies in New York State. Between the two lies the St. Lawrence River, which has

served as the main conduit for the smuggling operations, according to state Sen. Michael Balboni (R-East Williston). As the chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans, Homeland Security and Military Affairs, Balboni is extremely aware of the concerns regarding illegal smuggling and immigration.

“It is a major concern when it comes to protecting the state and the country,” says Balboni. “Why couldn’t the U.S. set up a border patrol just outside of the Indian nation? Some have felt that it would set up a war. We just don’t have a good system for dealing with this issue.”

Nothing stops the smuggling, either. According to the tribal source, even when the winter comes, the moving of the goods goes on unabated, and instead of boats, snow-mobiles are employed to traverse the frozen waters. But as long as the reservations are seen as sovereign Indian nations, no U.S. authority can enforce law. That is the biggest problem, according to lawmakers at all levels.

“It’s a touchy subject, and not just in New York, but across the entire Canadian border,” says Raia. “[The Indian nations] are making money from U.S. citizens. The least they can do is let us protect the borders.”

The tribe says it has worked to curb illegal activity. “The Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe has a tribal police force that works with local and state authorities, including the state police, and U.S. Border Patrol, as a matter of policy and has done so for more than 10 years to help patrol the border,” says tribe spokesperson Leslie Logan.

Assemb. David Townsend Jr. (R-Westmoreland), a former New York State trooper, understands the challenges the state faces when it comes to dealing with Indian nations and security. Townsend has done battle with Indian nations in his area of Upstate New York, most notably the Oneida tribe.

The Saint Regis tribal council has angrily refuted these charges, and says it has done everything in its power to work with U.S. and local authorities. “Our law enforcement and border security-related efforts receive little or no federal homeland security funding due to a quirk in the law which severely limits tribes from securing these resources. This is the real ‘black hole’ that exists for our community,” said the council in a February, 2006 letter to The New York Times.

“We continue to work with Congress to correct this inequity, but in the meantime, our tribe is absorbing the cost of the United States’ border security responsibility. Indeed, our tribe is working above and beyond our call of duty to address these law enforcement challenges.”

The issue was also enough to get the attention of both U.S. Rep. Carolyn McCarthy (D-Garden City) and Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington), who wrote to Pataki’s office asking to be apprised of the situation.

“The issue [with sovereign Native American nations] raises unique questions,” says Israel. “When you have a sovereign nation along the border, it could create enforcement issues.

“The fact is, because the immigration issue has become so politicized, all the attention has been focused on the Mexican border. Meanwhile, Canada is a virtual revolving door,” says Israel. “We are vulnerable, and terrorists exploit vulnerabilities.”

When asked why he thinks Pataki has turned a blind eye to the security issues, he laughs heartily. "There is a whole lot of money being made in those casinos," he says. "Money talks and BS walks. There is no other way to say it."