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## Racetrack slot proposal revives Wampanoag gambling hopes

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By Nelson Sigelman

For years, the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) has watched its prospects of building a tribal casino in Massachusetts appear and disappear like a shimmering golden mirage on the horizon.

After several years of inaction, a renewed push by key lawmakers to pass legislation that would allow racetrack owners to install slot machines appears to have revived the tribe's fortunes and interest in gaming.

Donald Widdiss of Chilmark, chairman of the Wampanoag Tribe (WTGH), said yesterday that economic development remains a priority for the tribe. "If gaming should become a part of that, that is an issue we will deal with at that time," he said.

Mr. Widdiss said there are a number of gaming bills before state lawmakers and it is still too early to say what path the tribe will pursue. According to a report published Monday in the New Bedford Standard Times, Mr. Widdiss said that the tribe would assert its right to build a resort casino under Indian gaming laws if slot machines are allowed.



The Senate last fall approved a bill that would allow slot machines at four racetracks. The House is expected to take up the bill sometime this month, said Rep. Eric Turkington of Falmouth, who represents the Vineyard.

Various other bills filed on Beacon Hill would allow a combination of slot machines and two casinos, one in western Mass and another in southeastern Mass where the approximately 900-member Wampanoag tribe would be given preference.

The tribe and its backers have spent millions of dollars on lobbyists and plans for a casino, so far unsuccessfully. According to the Standard Times, the tribe has hired Boston lobbying firm of Donoghue, Barrett and Singal to keep watch on the current situation.

As the state's only federally recognized Indian tribe, the WTGH would have a considerable legal advantage under federal gaming law should the state legalize slot machines. But that advantage may not last long. The Mashpee Wampanoags, who are actively seeking federal recognition, have also hired State House lobbyists.

It is unclear whether Gov. Mitt Romney would veto legislation allowing slots or casinos and if that veto could be sustained.

The Standard Times reported that Mr. Widdiss said that the tribe believes it has the right under Indian gaming law to open a full resort casino, if the state approves a form of Class III gambling like slot machines.

The bill House lawmakers will take up would allow up to 2,000 slot machines at four race tracks that have seen their fortunes decline along with the interest in horse racing.

Representative Turkington told The Times Tuesday he is opposed to providing a gambling bailout for the state's race tracks, in the form of a law that opens up the door to slot machines. "If the race tracks are having economic difficulty because people aren't interested in the races," said Mr. Turkington, "that doesn't mean we bestow on them a license to basically print money, which is what slot machines are."

Sen. Rob O'Leary of Barnstable, one of only seven senators to vote against the racetrack slot bill, said he opposes any



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expansion of gambling. "I just think it is the wrong way to go for the state in terms of generating revenue," said Senator O'Leary. "I think on balance the negatives outweigh the positives."

### Roll the dice again

In 1994 the tribe and its corporate backers, Carnival Hotels and Casinos, unveiled plans that depicted a 450,000-square-foot casino, a 270,000-square-foot entertainment complex, and a 500-room hotel with 8,000 to 9,000 parking spaces on 175 acres in the city of New Bedford.

But the proposal to build a casino and entertainment complex on a New Bedford municipal golf course was stymied when the tribe could not gain either the needed two-thirds legislative approval for the transfer of public lands or a state "compact" detailing how a casino would be regulated.

The tribe next went to Fall River and tried to cut a new deal to build a 60,000-square-foot, 1,200-seat high-stakes bingo hall at the former Fall River Municipal Airport. Despite the support of Fall River mayor Edward M. Lambert Jr., firm opposition by city councilors doomed that plan.

Carnival reportedly spent approximately \$10 million to bring Indian gambling to southeastern Massachusetts. Not clear is how much the tribe spent, but critics at the time said the tribe had spent \$7 million with few results or economic benefits.

In August 2001 the tribe launched another effort to build a gambling casino in southeastern Massachusetts by assembling a high-priced lobbying team to win support from state lawmakers. The tribe's backing for its third attempt to build a casino came from the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana, which operates the highly profitable Paragon Casino in central Louisiana.

But the tribe was unable to win the support of the powerful Speaker of the House, Thomas M. Finneran, for a Foxwoods-style casino and the measure failed. In published reports, Mr. Finneran said he thought the tribe was chasing "fool's gold."

In its federal filings at the time, the Wampanoag tribe acknowledged an accumulated debt of approximately \$11.6 million to the private investor with whom it sought approval earlier to develop a casino. According to the previous contract, that money, plus interest, was to be paid from the proceeds of a casino development, should it eventually occur. The tribe had argued that it did not owe the sum, based upon an allegation that CHC Management Corporation, the casino investor, had broken its contract with the tribe.

Yesterday, asked if the tribe continues to owe its former backers millions, Mr. Widdiss said, "That is not the case."

In Dec. 2002, Beverly Wright, tribal chairman at the time, said the tribe could and "probably would" open a casino at a still undisclosed location in southeastern Massachusetts within 16 months after the legislature approved the first slot machine at a racetrack or anywhere else.

Ms. Wright made her comments at a public hearing convened by a special 19-member state gaming panel appointed by Acting Gov. Jane Swift to consider casino gambling.



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