

Conservative lawmakers try to block Native gaming

by Jeff Richardson
Tundra Times staff

Sen. Robin Taylor of Wrangell has pushed a bill through the State Senate to derail Native gaming projects before they even get started. The action came as the Klawock Cooperative Association was engaged in negotiations with the State of Alaska regarding parameters for a gaming operation on Native trust land in the village and angered tribal leaders there.

"They're reacting without doing their homework," said Roseann Demmert, president of the association. She said the bill, which would ban Monte Carlo-style gambling

events, would hurt not only tribes looking for ways to wean themselves from state and federal fiscal support, but numerous non-profit groups that rely on such events for a large portion of their funding. "They're not just striking out at tribes, they're striking out at the charitables."

Although the bill—SB 172—apparently does not mention casinos or Native-run gambling enterprises, conservative backers have stated their belief that the law would give the state authority to block Native casinos. Demmert says they're wrong, citing a very explicit opinion handed down by the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals on gaming jurisdiction issues.

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"Ultimately, it's the governor's decision even if they pass the bill. So Sen. Taylor could be wrong," she said.

Demmert added that even the governor's approval is largely a formality. What's at stake in the year-long negotiations with state officials is how, rather than if, a gaming can proceed. Discussions include topics such as law enforcement and public safety. She said discussions with the Knowles administration have been very positive so far.

"By federal law, they have to negotiate in good faith. By deliberately passing (such a) bill after we've started negotiating is bad faith. Ev-

erything was going real well. It's in his (the governor's) hands," said Demmert. "We've talked to our attorney and we'll see what happens."

She said the bill was rushed through the Senate without hearings.

"It's really a sad way to do business in the state. It doesn't say much for what they think of our Native people," said Demmert.

Three other southeast Native villages which have some trust land, similar in status to Indian reservation land in the Lower 48, are considering gaming operations. To date, none has progressed as far as Klawock in their deliberations. Marlene Zuboff, executive director of the tribal govern-

ment in Angoon, says there's no rush to get into gaming. It's just one of several possible economic development ventures.

"At this time it's a possibility. We're keeping our options open," Zuboff said. "There's been no great serious discussion. We haven't done a full-scale analysis. (But) the tribe has kept updated."

