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Opponents step up fight against Catawbas' proposed casino in Kings Mountain

By Joe DePriest

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Want to go?

The Citizens Information Forum on the effects of a casino in Kings Mountain will be 6:30 p.m. July 17 at the Family Worship Center, 1818 Shelby Road, Kings Mountain.

(KINGS MOUNTAIN, NC) Opponents of the Catawba Indian tribe's plan to build a casino near Kings Mountain are stepping up their fight against the controversial proposal.

Since February, the grass-roots Kings Mountain Awareness Group has warned about the potential negative impact, such as increased crime and gambling, while challenging claims that the casino would have a positive economic impact.

The group has hosted two community educational meetings and a business owners meeting.

At the next community forum on July 17, Les Bernal, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Stop Predatory Gambling, will talk about the impact of casinos in small towns.

"We're continuing to spread the word," said Adam Forcade, founder and chairman of the Kings Mountain Awareness Group. "It's starting to ripple and expand."

He said the organization's Facebook page has grown to more than 1,000 followers and that members speak out against the casino at every meeting of the Kings Mountain City Council and Cleveland County Board of Commissioners. They're trying to get elected officials to rescind their letters of support sent to the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Increasing backlash

In September, the Catawba Indian Nation unveiled plans for a casino that could bring 4,000 jobs to a site off Interstate 85, about 30 miles northwest of its reservation in Rock Hill.

The project has faced a backlash from a bipartisan group of elected officials who say they don't want the casino in North Carolina. The \$339 million project is in a holding pattern as the tribe waits for the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs to decide whether to place the casino property in trust.

Forcade, a U.S. Army veteran and field manager for a floor systems company, lives 7.1 miles from what he calls "ground zero" – where the casino would be built. When he first heard about the project, he wanted more information but said he couldn't find any.

Forcade learned that residents were either unaware of the proposal or thought it was a done deal.

His vision for the awareness group was to research and share "real data" on the impacts of a casino in Kings Mountain and to "encourage citizens to be an informed voice."

Group eyes Supreme Court

Members such as Beauford Burton believe elected officials made a serious mistake by endorsing the casino.

"I don't think it's good for the area or the state," said Burton, 70, of Kings Mountain. "If we could have had a vote (on the issue), I think leaders would be shocked to see how many people are against it."

Kings Mountain City Council member Keith Miller, the only elected official in Cleveland County who didn't sign the letter of endorsement, is still opposed to the casino development.

"I think the risks may outweigh the benefits," said Miller, who has written a 76-page special report on the casino's impacts. "I don't think it's prudent to expose the community to the potential risks."

He thinks the casino has a 50-50 chance of going forward. But he also says that, because of possible challenges from neighbors, "there's a very good chance of the issue going to the Supreme Court."

This week, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court handed down a decision that clears the way for repealing the state casino law to appear on the November ballot. The Boston Globe reported the decision sets up "a fierce referendum campaign in the fall and summer" and places the "fate of the state's nascent gambling industry into the hands of the people."

The Kings Mountain Awareness Group has issued a flier about the July 17 forum, telling people, "You don't get a vote at the ballot box, but your voice is your vote. Be an educated vote."

At the meeting, Bernal said he'll focus on government sponsorship of casinos and lotteries as "a failed experiment."

"It creates inequality and unfairness," he said. "Inevitably, it will fail in Kings Mountain."

