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What does a casino in the Charlotte area mean for the community?

Hedging their bets

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By Ryan Pitkin

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While the Catawba Indian Nation hopes to begin construction on a multi-million-dollar movie studio just south of Charlotte in the coming months, a proposed casino project a little further down the border remains in limbo as the Nation waits for approval from the federal government.

Meanwhile, residents living around the potential site disagree about whether the casino's impact will be positive or negative for those living around it. Nearly 2,000 people from Kings Mountain — a small town on the Carolinas' border just west of Gastonia that sits closest to the proposed casino site — and the surrounding areas have signed a petition calling for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to approve the land-to-trust application for 16 acres of land that would allow the tribe to build a casino there. The casino would bring between 4,000 and 5,000 jobs to the area, but some have been taking a stand against its arrival and all they say will come with it.

Adam Forcade founded the King's Mountain Awareness Group (KMAG) to oppose the casino after officials with the Catawba Indian Nation submitted the application to the BIA over two years ago. The group has over 1,700 members on its Facebook page.

"The biggest problem with the casino is that it encourages inequality," Forcade says. "If you look at the product of a casino, that will tell you what their target audience is. The product of a casino is nickel, dime and quarter slots, so who are they targeting? They're targeting the poor. That's the people who are most prone to fall victim to the get-rich-quick schemes. People are desperate, they need a way out, the government is presenting this as your way out. The government shouldn't prey on the people who are most at risk."

Six of seven city council members signed letters of support that were said to speak for the community at the time the application was submitted, but Forcade said the process was done behind closed doors without any community feedback or education. One council member refused to sign a letter and council member Tommy Hawkins later rescinded his support, stating at a town hall meeting that he had since become opposed to the entire idea. Hawkins refused comment for this story.

Forcade is hoping his group can convince more local officials to rescind their support in the upcoming year, in an effort to convince the BIA to not approve the casino.

"One of the biggest factors that the BIA bases their decision on is local support and right now they have a false impression of local support," Forcade says. "They've gotten a letter from the county commission and a letter from the city council, but that's not the community's desires and wishes."

Forcade says KMAG is optimistic it can convince more council members to take a stand against the casino, and he believes the ousting of pro-casino Mayor Rick Murphrey after serving seven terms in November sent a message that the voters agree with him. He said three members of the new council are currently in opposition to the casino and he hopes to turn a fourth soon, (which would be a majority) especially "now that the old mayor is not there to influence their decision."

The new mayor, however, isn't on KMAG's side either. When asked about the casino, Mayor Scott Neisler said he approves of its construction, mainly because Kings Mountain owns its electric power utility, funding a large part of the town's budget, and it's estimated that the casino will double the current power usage of the entire town. He downplays any opposition to the casino, saying it's a "dead issue" because it's in the BIA's hands and he doesn't believe any new stance by local government will affect the organization's decision.

"We've got much more important things to discuss and much more important issues to tackle, so why would we take on issues that we have no control over?" Keistler says. "I'd much rather spend my time on things that affect Kings Mountain that we have a hand in."

Regardless, KMAG will continue to confront officials about on the issue. Members planned to show up in full force to the first meeting of the new council and mayor on January 26, after this issue was sent to print.

Not everyone thinks like Forcade, however. Martin Mongiello, chair of the Tourism Development Authority in nearby Grover, started a petition asking that the BIA hurry along in approving the Nation's application. The petition currently has just under 2,000 signatures.

Mongiello says he lived in a rural part of Connecticut near the current sites of Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun casinos when they were constructed and witnessed the economic uplift they brought to a struggling area.

"All of the crazed, undocumented and unproved lies religious groups are expressing, they have no proof of what they're saying. There have been several studies showing economic uplift that were completed and shown to Congress," Mongiello says. "The crime that they predict — the knifings, or mafia gangs that will come — I never witnessed any of that. I lived through it all in Connecticut, just

wading in the lies. What I saw was what I see today, which is a very positive impact. I actually lived through all of this so I find it quite entertaining to hear all these people run their mouths about everything."

For his part, Forcade said that KMAG is not religiously motivated and has worked with progressive organizations like NC Policy Watch and more conservative groups like NC Family Policy Council.

Forcade (like Mongiello) cites multiple studies as well as Congressional testimony that back up his point. He believes past examples have shown that a casino near King's Mountain will shatter the local economy by convincing residents to spend their disposable income outside of locally owned businesses and will bring an increase in crimes such as theft and domestic violence.

There has been evidence of casinos having negative effects on local communities. Atlantic City, for example, has an infamous history of not being able to sustain even a single grocery store. In a 2013 study, the National Association of Realtors called the impact of a casino on nearby property values "unambiguously negative." A 2005 University of Maryland review found that communities that allow gambling see a small increase in substance abuse, mental illness, suicide and violent crime and a larger than 10 percent increase in auto theft, larceny and bankruptcy.

Regardless of what you believe in regards to a casino's positive or negative impacts on surrounding communities, it will surely be a boon to the Catawba Indian Nation, the only federally recognized tribe in South Carolina.

Multiple calls to Catawba Indian Nation representatives over a two-week span for this story went unreturned, so their plans for the money are unclear. However, a Duke University study showed that funds from a Harrah's casino in Qualla Boundary has been a great help to struggling Cherokee Indians in western North Carolina.

In 2014, during testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, Duke professor E. Jane Costello testified about the impact of a nearly \$4,000-per-person supplement given to area families from casino profits.

"For families that hovered near poverty, the cash supplement that lifted them above the federal poverty line had a powerful effect in both the short and longer terms," Costello testified. "Four years before the supplement, children in these families had high levels of anxiety, depression and conduct problems. Four years after the supplement began, levels were no higher than those of children who were never poor."

For Mongiello, who is also CFO of the American Revolutionary War Living History Center, believes the benefits that would come from a casino in Kings Mountain are something the Catawba Indian Nation has long been owed for their loyalty during the Revolutionary War.

"You see the Cherokee Nation with a casino, this is the tribe that did everything they could to kill the settlers and sign with the British officers. The Catawba (Indian) Nation, who did side with the settlers, had their lands and homes burned to the ground," Mongiello says. "They're the ones that actually helped create America. Why don't they have a casino yet? Where's their reward? It seems a bit unjust, unbalanced and a bit uncool that we're not actually looking out for the ones that helped us."

It's unclear when the Bureau of Indian Affairs will make its decision, as they do not comment on pending applications, but people on both sides of the debate believe the word will come down in the coming months.

Until that day, Forcade said he will continue to speak at every local meeting in an attempt to convince more people of his cause.

"Even though you may live in Charlotte and may not have plans of seeing the casino much less going there, you pay even if you don't play," he said. "That's the biggest problem with predatory gambling, is that you pay even if you don't play. If you look at the added load to the system, somebody has to pay for all that, and it gets spread out. Obviously, anyone who's concerned about the plight of those with less needs to be concerned with this issue because it's direct. They're coming after the people who can least afford it."