

Poarch Creeks willing to negotiate deal with Alabama, tribe leader says

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By [Mike Cason](#) | mcason@al.com

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A top official with the Poarch Band of Creek Indians said today that the tribe is willing to negotiate a deal with the state for expanded gambling if it can help both sides.

That's not a new position for the Poarch Creeks. But the issue is timely because gambling could become an issue in the upcoming legislative session, which starts in February.

Poarch Creek Vice Chairman Robert McGhee spoke to Gov. Robert Bentley's new gambling advisory council.

"We've always been here and just ready to do that if that's the will of the state and the will of the people," McGhee said. "It's got to be mutually beneficial."

The Poarch Creeks operate electronic bingo casinos in Atmore, Wetumpka and Montgomery. The tribe is authorized to offer electronic bingo in Alabama under federal law. The state collects no tax revenue on the games and does not regulate the casinos.

The Poarch Creeks would need to enter a compact with the state to offer slot machines and table games like blackjack, roulette and craps.

Under a compact, the state could share in the revenue from the expanded offerings.

The tribe has been on record for some time in saying it is interested in such an arrangement. It also is interested in a fourth location in north Alabama.

Bentley appointed the advisory council last month to study state and federal gambling laws, tax revenues and other issues associated with gambling.

The 11-member group will present findings and recommendations to the governor and the Legislature by Jan. 31.

Bentley appointed the group after his proposal for a lottery to support the state budget failed during a special session of the Legislature in September.

The lottery plan died in a crossfire of competing interests, including lawmakers flatly opposed to gambling and those who sought protections for non-Indian electronic bingo operations in their counties.

Also today, attorney Carrie McCollum gave the council an overview of gambling laws in Alabama and explained some of the mechanics of a tribal compact.

Joe Godfrey, executive director of the Alabama Citizens Action Program, which lobbies the Legislature on behalf of churches, told the council it would be a mistake for Alabama to expand gambling through a compact or lottery.

Les Bernal, national director of Stop Predatory Gambling, told the council that commercial gambling leaves behind a lower standard of living and that gambling profits depend on gambling addicts.

Rep. Craig Ford, D-Gadsden, a member of the council, told Bernal that gambling is already in Alabama but the state is not reaping the tax benefits. Ford said people are going to all four neighboring states to gamble and the state is getting shortchanged.

"Our General Fund has been in dire straits the last six years," Ford said.