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Poarch Creek adviser: north Alabama 'great opportunity' for casino

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By Mary Sell Montgomery Bureau

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MONTGOMERY – Allowing the Poarch Band of Creek Indians to increase the type of gambling it offers at its three current casinos could generate \$50 million to \$70 million in revenue a year for the state.

That amount would increase if another casino were added in north Alabama.

“There is great opportunity within the north, in the northwest,” said Robert McGhee, governmental relations adviser for the Poarch Creek. He said the tribe didn’t have a specific location in mind, but had studied the issue.

McGhee spoke Thursday to Gov. Robert Bentley’s recently created advisory council on gaming. It’s a group looking at possible changes to the state’s gaming laws before the 2017 legislative session.

McGhee said the Poarch Band is open to discussions about a revenue-sharing agreement, called a compact, that would allow the tribe to operate traditional table games currently not offered anywhere in the state.

A compact could generate money for the state and “stop this constant battling every year in the Statehouse,” McGhee said.

A casino in north Alabama wouldn’t have to be part of a compact, he said, but would make sense if the state wanted a strategic plan to generate revenue.

The tribe has three casinos in Atmore, Wetumpka and Montgomery with Class II electronic bingo machines.

The revenue-sharing would be dependent on Poarch Creek being the only facilities with Class III games, McGhee said. But others could have Class II electronic bingo.

State leaders for years have looked at gaming as a possible money maker for the struggling General Fund.

A proposal to let Alabamians vote to create a revenue-generating lottery died in the Alabama Senate this summer.

Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh has previously proposed legislation to allow Class III gaming at the state's four dog tracks in Birmingham, Macon County, Eutaw and Mobile. Gambling revenue would be taxed at 13 percent.

The council on Thursday also heard from those who think expanded gaming in the state is a bad idea. Les Bernal, director of national group Stop Predatory Gambling, said the government should not promote gambling and that the bulk of revenue would come from people who can't afford to lose it.

Council member Rep. Craig Ford, D-Gadsden, said people now cross state lines to gamble. He said he wants legislation "to keep Alabamians' tax dollars here at home."

The council will meet again next month.