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# Town, tribe still betting on casino in Middleboro

**A year after the largest town meeting in state history approved the deal, an Indian gambling mecca in Middleboro seems a distant dream.**

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By Alice C. Elwell

**GateHouse News Service**

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MIDDLEBORO —

A year ago this week, television camera crews were a regular sight on the street.

The streets were plastered with signs.

Under enormous tents on the high school ball field, Middleboro hosted the largest town meeting the state had ever seen, where nearly two-thirds of the 3,700 people who showed up said yes to an \$11 million-a-year agreement that provides \$250 million in infrastructure improvements for a tribal casino.

And after all was said and done, then-Tribal Chairman Glenn Marshall lit up a celebratory cigar and declared, “I’m so doggone happy, I don’t know what to do.”

A year later, most of the signs have fallen to the wayside, neighbors have reached an accord and Route 44 is still badly in need of an overhaul.

And Gov. Deval Patrick, who for months championed legalizing gambling in the state, appears none too eager to lend his support to the plan. At an event in Taunton on Tuesday, Patrick told The Enterprise he is not prepared to begin formal compact negotiations with the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe, saying it would be an “academic” exercise to do so before the plan has been approved by the federal government.

The governor acknowledged, however — as did his top adviser on the matter, Secretary of Housing and Economic Development Dan O’Connell — there are ongoing meetings with the tribe, which he described as “open, constructive and candid conversations.”

Last fall, Patrick pumped up the casino craze by pitching a plan to open three commercial casinos in the state to help bail out the flagging economy. The legislature shot down the plan.

It's been almost a year since the Wampanoag's land-into-trust application was submitted to the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the tribe expects a decision by next spring, said tribal spokesperson Scott M. Ferson.

"There are continued discussions between the tribe and BIA as the application makes it way through the process," Ferson said. "There has been no indication from the BIA there will be a delay."

And as for negotiating a deal with the state, he said the current tribal Chairman Shawn W. Hendricks Sr. "will request compact negotiations at the appropriate time, knowing compact discussions typically are started before the land is formally taken into trust."

Ferson said the Middleboro land, 539 acres on Precinct Street, is still in the hands of investors, led by world-class casino operators Sol Kerzner and Len Wolman.

For Selectman Wayne C. Perkins, the lead man on his board last year, it's been a relatively quiet summer. But he said he thinks most people are still are in favor of the plan.

"Everybody's sitting back with a wait and see attitude ... the majority I talk to are looking forward to a resort casino going forward," said Perkins.

Perkins said relations between the town and tribe took a big step forward during the tribe's annual powwow this summer. The tribe welcomed a Middleboro contingent into the sacred inner circle, Perkins said.

"We actually participated in a ceremony of peace with the tribe," he said.

Richard Young, president of Middleboro's CasinoFacts and the statewide coalition Casino Free Mass, said that during last year's hoopla, many chose sides on the casino issue, but the lines have gotten blurred.

The heated exchanges over the issue that were common last year have cooled as well. Young said he has always had good conversations with the pro-casino allies.

"I try to respect their opinion, although I disagree, and I hope they respect my opinion," he said.

But that does not mean he is giving up the fight to stop casino gambling. Young said the PR wizards nicknamed the "casino killers," Dennis and Douglas Bailey, are waiting in the wings for the battle he expects to resume once the BIA releases the results of an environmental impact report.

Tribal casino or not, the governor isn't giving up his commercial casino plan. On Tuesday he told The Enterprise, "It may come back again. We're going to have to deal sooner or later with expanded gambling."

"For me it's never been about gambling, it's about jobs and revenue," Patrick said

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