

Kenosha casino supporters turn to Feingold for help

BY JOE POTENTE jpotente@kenoshanews.com

Supporters of the Menominee Nation's \$808 million Kenosha casino proposal packed a town hall meeting Monday to urge U.S. Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., to support the project.

Feingold, who was in Kenosha for a previously scheduled listening session at Northside Library, told the crowd he usually doesn't get involved in casino debates as a senator and that he opposes expanding gambling in Wisconsin. But, he said he is sympathetic to effects of the changing economy in southeast Wisconsin and is willing to listen to casino supporters.

"My bias is it's a really bad thing for us to start doing," Feingold said of federal lawmakers taking positions on local casino proposals.

That did not stop more than a dozen speakers — including several from the local organized labor community — from telling the senator of the merits of the project.

Chief among these were the estimated 3,000 jobs the casino would create, once fully developed. Also highlighted was a project labor agreement designating union contractors to build it.

"This means a lot of jobs to a lot of people," said Don Cardinali, business representative for the Painters and Allied Trades District Council No. 7.

"You've always stood up for the workers," said Tom Reiherzer, president of the Southeastern Wisconsin Building Trades Council. "I hope you take back (to Washington) what we're saying here, how important these jobs are."

The proposed casino is awaiting a decision from the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs and U.S. Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne. If the federal government OKs it, Gov. Jim Doyle would have the final authority to approve or deny the project.

As a senator, Feingold would not vote up or down on the project.

Some speakers at Monday's meeting, such as Kenosha County Executive Allan Kehl, expressed concerns about other issues, however, such as talk about changes in Bureau of Indian Affairs rules and regulations that could affect off-reservation casino approvals.

State Sen. Robert Wirth, D-Pleasant Prairie, urged Feingold to consider the two referendums in which Kenosha residents approved casino gambling.

Feingold acknowledged the value of casino gambling to the state's tribes and the relationships it has helped to develop between American Indians and non-Indians.

"You are making important arguments," Feingold said. "I do need to look at it, but I'm not starting at ground zero."

Karen Washinawatok, a member of the Menominee Legislature, said she was pleased to hear Feingold's thoughts, despite his past opposition to tribal gambling. "It sounds like he's keeping an open mind, and that is important," she said.

The listening session is part of a statewide series, in which Feingold holds a meeting in each of Wisconsin's 72 counties each year. Monday's meeting in Kenosha, the senator announced, drew the 50,000th visitor since he began holding the meetings in 1993.

Other topics broached by visitors included health care, the environment, education, school safety and the war in Iraq.

Feingold drew applause on the latter topic, when he noted he has long been a war opponent. He touted legislation he recently introduced to begin redeploying U.S. troops within 120 days of enactment — a plan he said will not further endanger military personnel.

“We don’t walk up to the guy in Baghdad and say, ‘Hey guy, give me your rifle, give me your helmet, you’re staying here,’” Feingold said.



KENOSHA NEWS PHOTOS BY KEVIN POIRIER
U.S. Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., addresses constituents during a listening session at Northside Library Monday. Feingold was greeted by supporters of the proposed Kenosha casino, who urged him to support the project.