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Piscataway Conoy continues tribal-status effort

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Their bid for state recognition as an Indian tribe has been rejected by two governors in a row.

But with the possibility of legalized slot machines looming, the Piscataway Conoy Confederacy and Subtribes yesterday urged the General Assembly to pass legislation to circumvent the governor's office and secure their status as a recognized Indian tribe in Maryland.

"We were the original people," said tribe member Rene Proctor. "We pay our taxes. We vote. But we're still invisible. ... This is a way to respect our ancestry."

But opponents of the effort told the Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee that the legislation would help the tribe bring full casinos to Maryland.

"This is a backdoor attempt to bringing a full-blown casino to the state," said Billy Red Wing Tayac, chief of a rival tribal group, the Piscataway Indian Nation. "The true motive behind this bill is a steppingstone to establish federal recognition and establishment of a full-blown gambling casino."

Even the possibility - however remote - of allowing gambling in Maryland through Indian tribal recognition makes the Piscataway Conoy question particularly sensitive for lawmakers. The Assembly is consumed by debate over Gov. **Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.**'s gambling proposal to permit 15,500 slot machines at six locations.

The Piscataway Conoy, which claims 3,500 members in Southern Maryland, has been pursuing state tribal recognition for almost a decade. In 2002, Gov. Parris N. Glendening vetoed legislation intended to push him to recognize the group.

In September, Ehrlich rejected the group's petition to become Maryland's first officially recognized tribe. He said the Piscataway Conoy had failed to meet the standard set in state law that the group's members must prove they are direct descendants of Indians living in Maryland before 1790.

The bill before the Senate committee yesterday would grant state recognition to the Piscataway Conoy if the Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs decides the group deserves that status - essentially cutting the governor out of the process. While the governor appoints the commission, its members have clashed with Glendening and Ehrlich in the recent years.

"We have passed the litmus test," said Mervin Savoy, the Piscataway Conoy's tribal leader. "We have our documents in order. You must right a wrong that has been going on since we were told we no longer existed in 1704."

Members of the tribe told the Senate committee that granting state recognition would make members eligible for federal aid, health benefits and the right to seek minority status in government contracts. It would even boost craft sales because they could be labeled as being made by Native Americans.

Tayac and other opponents of Piscataway Conoy recognition say the group's real purpose is to ultimately secure federal recognition and build a casino in Maryland.

The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs has rejected the group's petition for federal tribal recognition, but state recognition often makes it easier to win federal recognition. Federal law allows commercial gambling on tribal lands, often with little of the money going to state taxes.

"This is a stepping-stone to federal recognition," said anti-gambling activist Barbara Knickelbein of Glen Burnie. "Their underlying motive is a casino."

Piscataway Conoy members and their supporters insist their purpose has nothing to do with building a casino.

"State recognition doesn't give you the right to do that," said Del. Talmadge Branch, a Baltimore Democrat and longtime supporter of the recognition effort. "Gaming is not the issue. What is an issue is this tribe should be recognized."

Also opposing the bill was state Housing Secretary Victor L. Hoskins, who said the administration objects to taking the power to confer tribal recognition away from the governor.

The bill's prospects were not clear yesterday. The committee's chairwoman, Sen. [Paula C. Hollinger](#) of Baltimore County, said she did not think the committee wants to step into the rivalry between the two Piscataway groups.

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