

Proposed Casino a Contentious Issue

The winds of change are blowing and bringing with it a lot of questions about the proposed casino, performing arts and convention centre for Swift Current.

The File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council (FHQTC) and the Saskatchewan Indian Gaming Authority (SIGA) outlined the proposal Thursday at a public meeting in the Civic Centre Auditorium.

A representative from SIGA and FHQTC Tribal chairman Ron Crowe conducted a well-rounded presentation that included a video with footage of business people from cities that already have SIGA-run casinos, commenting on the positive spinoffs from those operations.

The audience of about 200 also was shown a list of the pros and cons that come with the introduction of a casino into a community.

The video explained how the casinos are an economic development tool, currently employing over 1,000 people in the province, and outlined the benefits of casino revenues to sport and recreation.

However, Ike Reimer of Swift Current is among those with serious concerns about gambling addiction and other negative effects a casino would have on the city.

"We need to think very long and hard about this. Yes, we need the arts centre, yes we need the convention centre, but do we have to pay the high price that comes with gambling in our community?", Reimer said.

"Someone said tonight that as many as three or four hundred people could be affected by problem gambling in this community. Is that the price we want to pay for an arts centre?"

In its presentation, SIGA said they market their casinos as responsible entertainment venues and is conscious of addiction problems that may arise from this type of entertainment.

A published survey was referred to, which pointed out that two per cent of gamblers became problem gamblers. Research also was presented, which said VLTs – already accessible in Swift Current – as the major cause for problem gambling.

Swift Current businessman Don Robinson told the audience that the benefits of a casino here out weigh the potential problems.

"As far as the performing arts centre and convention centre goes, I don't think we as a community of 16,000 can really afford to – on our own – build a performing arts centre and I don't think we'll ever get one if this proposal doesn't fly," said Robinson.

Increased tourism and its economic spinoffs are reasons enough for residents of the city to think long and hard before saying no to this proposal, he said.

I think the future of Swift Current is at stake. I don't think the status quo in Swift Current is sustainable any longer... We have to grow. With 250 proposed jobs coming into Swift Current as a result of this development, we just can't pass that up."

SIGA is Canada's largest First Nations employer with 1,130 employees, 800 of whom are First Nations Peoples.

Usually, SIGA has a target of staffing its gaming operations with 70 to 75 per cent First Nations People.

However, due to the small Aboriginal population in the Swift Current area, it's likely a casino here would employ about 20 to 25 per cent First Nations People.

Voters will have an opportunity to express their opinions on whether they support a casino in a non-binding plebiscite, which will be held during the October municipal elections

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