

STREET TALK

Hazard County

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By all regards in parse-tongued death throes, the legislative opposition to the Gun Lake Casino in Bradley Township made a potentially embarrassing appearance at a hearing for the State House resolution supporting the compact to allow Class III gaming, as the measure sailed to approval with a 6-0 vote after an hour of debate and testimony.

There were no new players on either side of the debate. On behalf of the Gun Lake Tribe was the same mix of Allegan County residents and municipalities, organized labor interests and the Kalamazoo Regional Chamber of Commerce.

Among the opposition were State Senators Patty Birkholz, R-Saugatuck, and Mark Jansen, R-Grand Rapids, who gave the tribe sufficient opportunity to embarrass them. In a press release issued later that day, the tribe noted Birkholz's "opposition to the compact, in part, due to her fears that it will provide economic benefits to Allegan County at the expense of downtown Grand Rapids." Birkholz represents all of Allegan County, but none of Kent County or Grand Rapids. Meanwhile, Jansen, the Grand Rapids delegate, spoke on behalf of his fears that a casino will negatively impact people in the surrounding area already addicted to dangerous behaviors, referring to Allegan County as the "meth capital of Michigan."

The offices of both senators confirmed the statements.

"I was worried that might be taken out of context," said Birkholz, noting she is a member of the state's Land Use Leadership Council. "We need to look at the West Michigan region as a whole."

While first pointing out that she is opposed to gambling in general, Birkholz explained that she has grave concerns that any harm to Kent County, where many of her constituents are employed, study, worship or have relatives, would be a net negative result to Allegan County.