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**Jones Beach casino far from a sure bet;
Location came up in state legislators' conversation;
Not on Shinnecocks' list and critics decry the idea**

BYLINE: BY MARK HARRINGTON AND BILL BLEYER

As the Shinnecock Indian Nation works to narrow the field of potential casino sites on Long Island to three or four, one potential dark-horse location has been discussed quietly by state legislators in recent months: Jones Beach State Park.

The notion of a casino in the stunning oceanfront park - among the most iconic and historic of Long Island's publicly owned sites - is roundly criticized by advocates who see the park as all but sacred ground. One compared the idea to building a shopping mall in Yellowstone National Park. And the Shinnecocks themselves, while intrigued by the idea, said they had not been formally approached about the site. Still, the idea, however far-fetched, has been discussed in the hallways of the Assembly in Albany.

"It certainly would seem to me to be another option for the tribe to consider," said Assemb. Fred Thiele Jr. (I-Sag Harbor), who added he learned of the idea from Assemb. Steven Englebright (D-Setauket), chairman of the Assembly parks committee. "It was an initial 'What do you think?' toward the end of the legislative session." Thiele said he felt "it was something worthy of further discussions."

Since winning federal recognition as a tribe earlier this fall, the Shinnecock Nation has studied many potential casino sites on Long Island, in both Nassau and Suffolk counties. Most sites are private property. One - the land around the Nassau Coliseum - is owned by the county. No single site has emerged in recent weeks as the most favored. A casino anywhere on Long Island is seen by proponents as a potential gold mine for state and local government.

Hurdles in the way

Creation of an Indian casino at Jones Beach would require a federal land-in-trust agreement, essentially converting the property to tribal land. That would require a compact with the state and approval by the State Legislature.

State Attorney General Andrew Cuomo, the Democratic candidate for governor in Tuesday's election, would not comment for this story. A spokesman for Republican candidate Carl Paladino said, "In principle, Carl is opposed to turning over any state land to an Indian tribe. We're not familiar with this proposal, but if there is a casino, Carl would propose that it be state-owned."

For his part, Englebright said he heard the suggestion this summer - when park closings were threatened by massive state budget cuts - from a constituent who saw it as a way to directly address the cuts with a potentially massive infusion of money from the casino into state coffers. He declined to say whether he endorses the idea.

Englebright said that "the idea of going into that site would have to be looked at, including whether or not it's compatible with historic uses for entertainment. The idea that a casino might be located in a site that has the potential to cause incredible traffic jams and intrude on a community of residential homes" elsewhere on Long Island increases the need for study for this site.

In concept, a casino would replace the actively used Softball West field and use the parking lot at adjacent Field 1, closed last year by budget cuts. The legislators said the site's appeal - besides its extraordinary beauty - was that a casino on state-owned parkland rather than private property might provide more revenue to offset severe cutbacks in the parks budget that have led to temporary closures of some parks.

In addition, the park is located near the junction of three parkways and is far from suburban neighborhoods where opposition to a casino is expected to be strong. The idea of building on county-owned land around the Nassau Coliseum in East Garden City has been criticized by neighboring residents.

Legislators have not broached the idea with Gov. David A. Paterson. But state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation spokeswoman Eileen Larabee dismissed a Jones Beach casino.

"It's not being contemplated, nor would it be consistent with our mission, which is, in part, to be responsible stewards of state parks' valuable natural, historic and cultural resources," she said. Larabee added that the department is always seeking new sources of revenue compatible with the parks' mission.

Jones Beach advocates are aghast at the very idea that what they consider their crown jewel could be defiled with a gambling facility.

"I think Robert Moses would turn over in his grave," said Malcolm MacKay, head of a new friends group for the park, the Jones Beach Rescue Organization. "A casino at Jones Beach is inappropriate. Jones Beach is an extraordinary public facility for recreation and for preservation and appreciation of the environment."

Robin Dropkin, executive director of the Albany-based advocacy group Parks & Trails New York, said "there's no doubt our parks desperately need more funding - the department's budget is down 18 percent from three years ago - but a casino at one of our most iconic parks is a potential violation of the public trust."

Strong opposition

Park advocates say the casino idea would never take off, citing the outcry over LIPA's proposed wind farm, which died, in part, because it would have been visible from the park. They also say that after the closed parks were reopened by shifting state funding before Memorial Day, any support for a casino probably evaporated.

But one notable person with a connection to Jones Beach, developer Donald Trump, said he likes the plan. Trump, who is embroiled in lawsuits with the state over his project to build a catering facility and restaurant by the Central Mall in the heart of the park, said, "It would be good for my project. It's certainly an interesting site."

News to the Shinnecocks

A reporter's call last week was the first the Shinnecocks said they had heard of the Jones Beach site. "I don't know anything about it," said tribal trustee Lance Gumbs. "We'd be interested" if it were offered, he said.

Meanwhile, the tribe has been working to narrow its list of possible Long Island sites, hoping to settle on three or four before year's end. Two sites in Nassau and two in Suffolk appear to be garnering the most attention, said one person close to the discussions. They are the land around the Coliseum - favored by Nassau County Executive Edward Mangano; the state-owned Belmont Park in Elmont; Brookhaven Town Airport in Shirley and the Parr Meadows property in Yaphank just north of the airport.

It seems likely that any Long Island location will generate a great deal of criticism - Jones Beach State Park chief among them.

"When Robert Moses conceived of Jones Beach in the 1920s, it was to provide urbanites with a wholesome and sophisticated alternative to the chaos and commercialism of places like Coney Island and Atlantic City," said Alexandra Wolfe of the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities. "Building a casino at Jones Beach would be like building a mall at Yellowstone - entirely antithetical to the ideals that created the park in the first place, and a real compromise to its historic integrity."

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