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Casino provision irks Campbell

As 'last resort,' Colo. senator may halt U.S. spending bill

**By Deborah Frazier, Rocky Mountain News
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Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell, R-Colo., said he'll consider halting the nation's spending bill if there's a secret rider creating an Indian casino east of Denver.

"He feels strongly it won't come down to that, but he's willing to take the drastic last resort," said Alton Dillard, Campbell's press secretary.

The omnibus spending bill, about the size of a metropolitan-area telephone book, is in a conference committee that includes Campbell.

The language of the so-called midnight rider has been floating in Congress for several days. Special-interest riders are inserted in the closing hours of Congress.

The rider doesn't name Colorado, the casino proposed by Council Tree or the site, but uses public law titles and township locations to describe the state, the land, the corporation and the Indian claims.

In late 2003, Golden-based Council Tree proposed buying 500 acres east of Denver, creating a reservation to settle land claims and building a casino to benefit the Cheyenne and Arapaho.

The Interior Department, which oversees Indian issues, killed that proposal in September.

"If someone is introducing a rider like that now, they are doing it without our awareness," said Michael Brendzel, Council Tree's vice president.

This week, Gov. Bill Owens asked some of Colorado's congressional delegation to watch for a last-minute attempt to create the Indian casino.

"We'd heard that someone was going to insert this into the omnibus appropriations bill," said Owens' spokesperson Dan Hopkins. "Our Washington, D.C., contact doesn't think the rider is in the bill right now."

Dillard said Campbell's office heard about the midnight rider late Thursday.

Sen. Wayne Allard, D-Colo., who was alerted by Owens, wasn't available for comment.

"People will have to do some digging to find out what's in there," Dillard said. "If the language is in there, he'll consider putting a hold on the bill until the language is removed."

The omnibus spending bill includes millions of dollars for Colorado, and Campbell would only block the bill as a last resort, Dillard said.

During Campbell's tenure, he's seen riders added after the conferees sign off and while the bill is en route to the government printing office, Dillard said.

Mark Grueskin, an attorney for the Colorado Gaming Association, said Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, who heads the Senate Appropriations Committee, is viewed as the likely inserter of the rider.

Stevens knew Council Tree's president, Steve Hillard, while Hillard was in Alaska working with native Alaskans on major business investments.

"Stevens might get it into a catchall provision when the right people are out of the room," Grueskin said. "That's when the deals are cut to benefit someone else's state."

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