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Owens to denounce casino

Sept. appearance with congressional panel will target proposed facility near DIA

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New York - Gov. Bill Owens said he will make a personal appearance before the Senate Indian Affairs Committee early next month to fight an Indian casino being proposed for the outskirts of Denver.

Owens had been invited to the Sept. 8 briefing in Washington on the Indian casino proposal, but until Saturday he'd been noncommittal about whether he would attend, send a statement or dispatch an aide.

Owens said he decided to attend personally to send a message about the depth of his opposition to the plan.

"I'm going to explain why Colorado doesn't want the federal government to place a casino in Colorado," Owens said Saturday while in New York for the Republican National Convention. "I want to make it very clear to the senators that this is important."

The Cheyenne-Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma have filed a 27 million-acre land claim with the Department of the Interior. The claim says northwestern Colorado, including all of Denver and Colorado Springs, rightfully belongs to the tribes.

But they've offered to give up the claim in exchange for permission to build a \$150 million casino complex near Denver International Airport.

The tribes' key financial backer, Longmont venture capitalist Steve Hillard, said Owens' personal appearance proves the "gravity and credibility" of the claims. But he says Owens is wrong to oppose the casino.

Hillard says the casino would generate \$1 billion in revenue for the state in its first 10 years, a figure that some of Colorado's existing casinos say is exaggerated.

"At a time when Colorado is at the bottom on education (funding), he's turning away \$1 billion for education," Hillard said.

Hillard already is scheduled to give his side at the briefing. The session is expected to be mostly attended by staffers rather than senators, because it's not a formal hearing.

Owens has said he opposes any expansion of gambling in the state, and also says he doesn't think the tribes have a valid claim to Colorado land.

"I'm confident it would be defeated in court," Owens said.

Owens and Colorado's members of Congress have voiced concerns that Senate Appropriations Committee chairman Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, might bypass the Interior Department and allow the casino by inserting language in a must-pass appropriations bill.