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Mohawk gaming makes heating assistance possible

By Shannon Burns
Today correspondent

AKWESASNE, N.Y. - In a land where Indian gaming has been a source of physical conflict, political strife and international attention, gambling has at least one benefit that can be celebrated unattested. On Nov. 28, representatives from the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe in Akwesasne accepted two checks totaling \$360,000 from the reservation's two gaming establishments to help heat the homes of the elderly and economically disadvantaged this winter.

The Akwesasne Mohawk Casino and the Mohawk Bingo Palace each presented checks in the amount of \$180,000. The money will be used by the tribe's Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program to offer \$600 in the form of fuel vouchers to 200 senior and 400 low-income households in Akwesasne.

Last year, the tribe offered fuel assistance to its senior citizens, regardless of their income. The widespread benefits of that assistance led to the tribe's decision to expand the program this year to include low-income families. The tribe approached the two gaming establishments - both tribally owned and located on the reservation - and asked if they could assist.

"They immediately responded and said they would do whatever it took to fund this request," said Chief James Ransom.

To be eligible for the vouchers, families must reside in the southern, or U.S., portion of the Mohawk territory. The reservation straddles the U.S. - Canada border; a separate program is set up to help families in the northern/Canadian portion. The tribe's LIHEAP program assists 501 families in the southern half each year.

According to the U.S. Energy Information

Administration, individual households are likely to pay 48 percent more for natural gas this year than last, 38 percent more for heating oil and 30 percent more for propane.

"This year, fuel costs are expected to increase substantially," said Ransom. "For households heating with fuel oil, it is expected to increase by 32 percent. Households can expect to pay an additional \$378 per household this heating season."

The casino, which opened in 1999, did not generate the profit many anticipated in its early years but has boasted growing revenue nevertheless.

"We are thrilled to have the profitability this year to fund these essential programs," said Dianna Tarbell, the casino's general manager.

The bingo hall opened in 1985. A few years ago it was near bankruptcy, but the addition of video lottery machines and a reorganization of administration turned things around dramatically. From 2003 - '04 the establishment's profits quadrupled.

The decision by both gaming facilities to contribute to the needy this winter is just one example of their contributions to the community. Both establishments regularly participate in community fundraisers, including the upcoming Mountain of Toys toy drive, which will bring Christmas gifts to needy children this holiday season.

"I would like to note that one of the criticisms we often hear about gaming at Akwesasne is, 'When is the community going to benefit?'" said Ransom. "While gaming now provides 58 percent of tribal revenues, the funding of this special request is a strong

statement that gaming is benefiting our community."

The profits of both establishments go directly into the tribe's general fund. The general fund, which also receives money from Akwesasne businesses, allows the tribe to contribute to essential programs on the territory like the police department, Head Start program and Akwesasne Boys and Girls Club. The gaming facilities now fund 58 percent of the general fund, up from 38 percent in 2004.

Akwesasne Mohawks have never received per capita payments from the gaming facilities,

but that option has never been entirely ruled out.

"Per capita payments are an option for the future," said Ransom. "We have a tremendous amount of unmet community needs that need to be fulfilled first. For example, we anticipate a \$2.5 million shortfall for health care in 2006 and gaming revenues will help us address that shortfall. Our tribal courts, police and housing are other areas that need support."

The tribe hopes to provide fuel assistance in coming years as well.