

John Williams
Oxford Hills Chamber of Commerce

Senator Luchini & Senator Schneck & members of the Veterans & Legal Affairs Committee, thank you for allowing me a few minutes to make remarks in opposition to LD 554: An Act to Create Gaming Equity and Farness for the Native American Tribes in Maine. My name is John Williams and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Oxford Hills Chamber of Commerce, located in Oxford Country and covering 13 towns with over 350 business members.

I'll get right to the point: I've testified here before in opposition to other Casino related bills and it's important that your committee knows that the citizens and the businesses of the Oxford Hills area, and the Board of Directors for the Oxford Hills Chamber of Commerce are collectively in opposition to the operation of any casino or gaming facility that could potentially impact, negatively, the operation of the Oxford Casino Hotel & Event Center in Oxford, Maine.

As you are likely aware, the casino has been operating far below capacity, with only 200 patrons allowed inside due to Covid-19 gathering restrictions. For context, Oxford Casino has a gaming floor capacity of 2,765 on a normal day. The pandemic has not just hurt Oxford Casino and Hotel-the facility is an economic engine for the whole region and we've all felt the impact of restricted visitor traffic over the last year.

I do not appear today to offer any testimony on the legal rights of Maine Native American Tribe. I will say that Maine voters and regulators have set the bar high with regard to approval of any gaming facility. To me, that means a statewide vote, local approval, and obedience to the 100 mile distance from another facility. The bill before you seeks to exempt the tribes from any state law considerations. I don't feel that this is a sound plan, especially when you consider what a great partner Oxford Casino has been with the State of Maine, sending millions of dollars to priority interests each year, to include the federally recognized tribes. The Oxford Hills Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors unanimously endorsed this project from the outset because they could see the opportunities that a facility of this type would create and how it would ultimately enhance economic development in the region for years to come and we are beginning to see this come to fruition, but this bill in its current form, could potentially reverse that.

This is a business in an area that still has great need, and can ill afford any reduction in its production of revenue, which of course would also mean a loss of jobs and certainly diminishing development opportunities if the casino's overall performance is affected.

The Oxford Casino has been a tremendous asset to the 13 communities of the greater Oxford Hills, no question about it, and that has certainly been the case with all of Oxford County, with continued support for local programs and charities, representation on the Chamber's Board of Directors, a catalyst for attracting and introducing new visitors to the western Maine region, and a willingness to work with and contribute to programs the Chamber facilitates . We couldn't ask for a better partner,

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a long, painful experience for us all. Now, just as we start to see light at the end of the tunnel, is the worst possible time to threaten this precious resource that so many folks in Oxford Hills count on. I ask that you respectfully reject this effort at casino gaming expansion.

Sincerely,
John Williams
Chief Executive Officer/Executive Director
Oxford Hills Chamber of Commerce
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