

It's been a while since we've spun the big news wheel and had it land on "casinos". What with fiscal crises gripping virtually every level of our government, information about a Buffalo casino and perhaps more importantly the swelling stakes swirling around plans of potential gambling halls in the Catskills has been largely unnoticed in these parts at least.

Although it has been reported recently that a Buffalo casino would be back on the table as part of a broader deal to allow the Seneca Nation of Indians to build their own facility in the Catskills, what hasn't been widely talked about is just how strongly the Senecas might be banking on the state's craving for casino cash.

In the desperate rush to open a gambling hall in what was decades ago one of the premier tourist destinations in all the northeast, the Senecas are apparently prepared to offer New York a wad of wampum that would wring the life from a water buffalo. Reports have pegged such a bribe, er, deal, at a half-billion dollars for that right, according to newspaper accounts published last week in both Rochester and Albany.

Seneca President Barry Snyder virtually needed a drool cup in talking recently about the possibilities of a casino there. "I love the idea of the Catskills, who wouldn't? Give us the Catskills, we'll put it anywhere," Snyder has been quoted as saying. As part of the rather seductive-sounding cash transaction, the Senecas would also suddenly "agree" that Buffalo is indeed all right as the spot for their third Western New York casino.

There are as many reasons as there are slots on a roulette wheel why they would offer up a deal that has been labeled as "extraordinary." Besides holding the seemingly lucrative carrot at the end of New York's financially strapped stick – the deal even includes a higher percentage of slot machine revenue than other similar casinos now give the state -- the Senecas obviously see it as a potential pre-emptive strike against any number of other tribes who are trying to rush to build a Catskills casino too.

Pataki has already negotiated land settlement claims with four tribes – with the promise of a Catskills casino among the chief incentives – and all four include some type of sales tax payment provision. Another is pending with a fifth tribe. The Senecas have no intention of making it six.

The whole notion of the state still holding out hope that someday it will convince the Senecas to fork over millions in annual tax receipts on gas and cigarettes oscillates between ludicrous and lunacy. But just to be sure, part of the bribe, er, payment, would again reinforce the Seneca's right to sell tax-free products. Even the governor isn't quite that desperate no matter how initially lucrative and lush the offer might seem. Indeed, the Senecas admit to selling at least 150 million packs of smokes a year. The state's excise tax is \$1.50 a pack. Even if there's a negotiated settlement for a lower figure, Pataki can at least do that math.

And it's instructive to know a thing or two about David Flaum, who's been trying to broker a deal for some time now between the two sides, and who is the intermediary in floating this latest cash for casinos compact.

To give you a hint, he just spent \$100,000 to attend the presidential inauguration. Over the years, a few of his dollars have managed to find their way into the Pataki fundraising coffers as well. And, he's far from a David-come-lately to the casino chase; as early as 2003, Flaum received a letter of intent for a Catskills casino from the Senecas. And, how's this for convenient, he owns about 500 acres of prime Sullivan County property, the most likely spot for at least one of the downstate betting dens.

There are court challenges, and more than just a handful of residents downstate who are still railing against any casino, much less five. But when the wheel stops, the winners will already be at the table. The Senecas are making sure they dramatically up the ante.

(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community weekly newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a combined paid circulation of 75,000 homes, providing collaborative advertising and editorial support for member publications. For more information on WIN, or to provide feedback on this column, visit our website at www.wnynewspapers.com. Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)