

PUBLIC SAFETY & SECURITY COMMITTEE
PUBLIC HEARING ON MARCH 8, 2016
TESTIMONY ON SB 357- AN ACT CONCERNING GAMING
TOM RODGERS/SCHAGHTICOKE TRIBAL NATION

Chairman Larson, Chairman Dargan, and members of the Committee,

My name is Tom Rodgers and I am an advisor to the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation. I am also a proud member of the Blackfeet Nation. Today I am here to offer testimony on S.B. 357 - An Act Concerning Gaming. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about this issue.

S.B. 357 contemplates the issue of bingo. As this committee is likely aware, bingo plays a hugely important economic and cultural role in the lives of many Native Americans. Not only do its revenues contribute to sustaining our tribal economies, but it also provides a place for our people, particularly our Elders, to meet and enjoy a better quality of life. In short, bingo is a fundamental part of our Native American cultural heritage.

Changes to the State's bingo laws therefore are of importance to the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation.

The Schaghticoke Tribal Nation has never been dealt a fair hand by the State of Connecticut, unlike the once impoverished and once excluded but now privileged Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation and Mohegan Tribe. I urge this committee to fix that wrong by amending S.B. 357 to allow the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation to establish their own class II tribal bingo gaming.

I would like to remind the committee that casino gaming in Connecticut began with the authorization of bingo on tribal lands in the late 1980s. This industry, and the resulting expanded tribal gaming industry, is under the authority of the federal Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988 (IGRA). IGRA sets forth an economic rationale for Native American gaming on reservations. The major purpose of the Act, according to Congress, was "to provide a statutory foundation for Native American gambling operations as a means of promoting economic development, self-sufficiency and strong tribal government." On June 28, 2005, a few months before the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation's federal recognition was rescinded, at the urging of this State's public officials, Senator McCain, then Chairman of the Committee on Indian Affairs said the following:

"It is important to remember that when Congress enacted IGRA in 1988, it was not creating another Federal program for Indians. Rather, IGRA was an acknowledgment of the ingenuity of the Indian tribes in finding a legal economic activity that could provide jobs on the reservations and supplement the meager Federal support for necessary tribal government services; 17 years later, that ingenuity has proven to be a greater success than anyone could have imagined."

The ability for tribes to open gaming facilities has been debated at the federal, state, and local level—and, all across the continent, tribal nations are building successful gaming facilities, sharing significant portions of the revenues generated with the states and municipalities that host and surround them. Today, the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation is

asking you to consider allowing their tribe to be granted the same opportunities as those of others, and to permit them to open a Class II bingo facility on their tribal land.

We hope that this committee does not have other motives for bringing this bill to a public hearing, such as converting the bill into something that gives more unconstitutional approvals to the existing privileged Connecticut tribes: a special exclusive right to commercial casino gaming. Not tribal casino gaming on tribal lands, but commercial casino gaming off of tribal lands with monopoly rights granted to now privileged tribal nations. We urge the Committee not to go down that path, because if it does, S.B. 357 will become just the latest example of the State's unfair and unconstitutional discrimination against the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation.

Committee members, I urge you all to look inside yourselves and ask: would this feel right, moral or fair? The Schaghticoke Tribal Nation only ask that you give our tribe that which is rightfully ours: an equal opportunity to improve the quality of life for our members.

I thank the Public Safety Committee and its leaders for the ability to testify today.