



VIEWPOINT

Richard Burr: Cherokee Indians are bullying other NC tribes

BY RICHARD BURR

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Rendering of new casino in Kings Mountain. Cleveland County officials are promoting the Catawba Indian tribe's plans for a "world-class" casino resort off I-85 in Kings Mountain.

Recently, a Native American tribe with deep historic ties to North Carolina announced its intent to purchase land across state lines for an "economic development" that could include a new casino. In order to put up a casino, the legislature would have to pass a measure allowing gambling on the site, but the legislation has already been introduced by the tribe's political allies.

The tribe is the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and the land in question is in Sevierville, Tennessee.

Yet here in North Carolina, the Cherokee are doing everything in their power to prevent the Catawba Tribe from acquiring land near Kings Mountain for “economic development” (also known as a casino). The episode is only the latest example of the Cherokee’s willingness to disenfranchise other tribes in order to protect their own lucrative gaming monopoly.

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Indian gaming generates more than \$105 billion in economic output each year. In North Carolina, where gaming is strictly regulated at the state level, the state’s only two casinos are operated by the Cherokee. A growing economy and a lack of competition have been good for business. Last year, the Cherokee announced record-breaking profits and advanced a \$250 million expansion of their Cherokee County casino.

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The tribe also donates hundreds of thousands of dollars each year to North Carolina politicians with little scrutiny. Whereas political action committees and office holders like myself file electronic financial disclosure reports that are easily searchable online and fully transparent, the

Cherokee the paper reports that are harder to track.

According to one review by a campaign finance watchdog, the Cherokee gave \$1.3 million in campaign contributions over the last three elections. That makes them one of the biggest and most powerful political donors in the state. In 2018 alone, the tribe donated nearly \$360,000 to lawmakers in the North Carolina General Assembly. Their sway was evident when many of those lawmakers then signed the Cherokee's letter opposing the Catawba gaming facility.

I've witnessed the Cherokee's aggressive tactics for years in my work with the Lumbees. The Lumbees are the largest American Indian tribe in the Eastern United States, and they've sought federal recognition since the 1880s. The federal government finally acknowledged them as a tribe in 1950s, but denied them the full benefits and services that other tribes receive. I've worked to help fix this injustice, but the Cherokee have long lobbied against Lumbee recognition because they view it as a threat to their federal benefits and gaming business.

The Cherokee even tried to take land from their own tribal members while pursuing economic



The Catawba's case is simple. Congress intended for the Catawba to be able to acquire land within their North Carolina service areas as part of their 1993 land settlement, but unclear language in the law itself left the question in limbo. The bill I've introduced with other Carolina Senators would clarify the language. The Cherokee have implied our bill would cut the state out of the process, but that is patently untrue. The law would still require the Catawba to negotiate a tribal-state compact before building any casino, giving the governor and legislature the final say. The Cherokee know this well because they hold a tribal-state compact that could serve as a model.

Whether it's the Lumbees or one mother's home, it seems that nothing is too big or too small for the Cherokee to oppose if it affects their bottom line. I hope North Carolina rejects such bullying tactics from any tribe and considers each case, including the Catawbas' and the Lumbees', on its merits. The stakes are too high.



Red Heritage Media production company, Catawba Indians have opened office in Fort Mill BY DON WORTHINGTON
Burr is a U.S. Senator representing North Carolina.



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