HAWAIIAN HOMESTEADS

Casino a bad bet for DHHL lands

The Hawaiian Homes Commission has been land-rich and cash-poor for most of its century of existence. And the mission it seeks to fulfill—issuing leases on homesteads for qualifying Native Hawaiians—requires cash. The question being posed to the commission this week: Would a casino be an appropriate way to raise that cash? Testimony on the issue will be heard on Monday, but the early reaction, rightly, indicates the answer is a firm “no.”

The 203,000-acre land trust oversees by the commission was set aside under a 1921 federal law, years after the annexation of the Republic of Hawaii to the U.S., to support self-sufficiency for the indigenous people. Those of at least 50% Hawaiian ancestry qualify for a residential, agricultural or pastoral lease. About 28,000 beneficiaries have languished on the waiting list, some for decades, for various reasons. Among them is that the highest demand is for parcels on Oahu, when more of the land, much of it needing costly infrastructure, is on other islands.

The state now administers the trust, through its Department of Hawaiian Home Lands, and the casino proposal by staff appeared on the agenda for the commission’s Monday meeting.

Up for a vote, likely on Tuesday, is a request that the commission approve a draft of a legislative bill that would authorize limited casino gambling at a single resort property that is designated for commercial use.

The development, on an undeveloped site within DHHL holdings in Kapolei, also could include the full range of resort accommodations and entertainment, such as golf, athletic, tennis, parks, theaters and sporting events.

But the casino is plainly the centerpiece. The bill is necessary because Hawaii and Utah are the two states where gambling in any form is illegal. Not surprisingly, however, during times of economic distress, proposals to legalize gambling come up, partly as a means to bolster sagging state revenues.

Of course, this is not the first time gambling has been seen as a fiscal occurrence, either for the state in general or for DHHL in particular. Through the years, for example, proposals for a lottery that could fund various state needs have been run up — and down — the state Capitol flagpole.

Casinos are a particular concern. The 2010 Legislature, facing myriad budgetary problems posed by the Great Recession, considered a measure that would legalize one: House Bill 2759, that “authorizes the Hawaiian Homes Commission (HHIC) to allow gaming on Hawaiian Home Lands and to con-