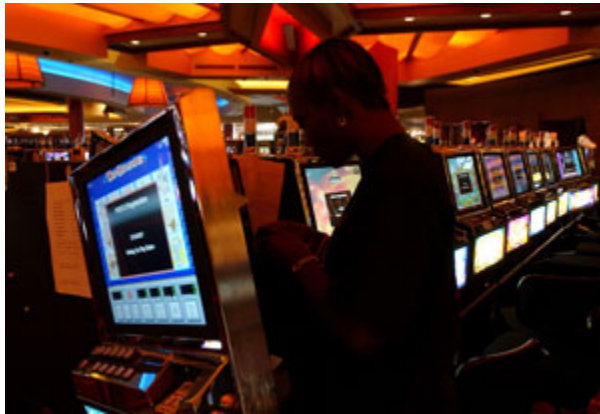


An economic ace

Casino Morongo is expected to draw about 2 million visitors annually

By STEVE MOORE / The Press-Enterprise

MORONGO RESERVATION - For nearly a year and half, millions of freeway drivers zoomed by the rising casino resort.



Amanda Lucidon / The Press-Enterprise

Renee Williams, of Hemet, installs video lottery machines at Morongo Casino, Resort & Spa, which, by the time of its Dec. 10 grand opening, will include 2,000 slot machines, 70 table games, and a 2,400-square-foot poker room.

They saw a steel and concrete skeleton going up - the tallest building in the Inland Empire.

On Wednesday, about 500 invited guests got a sneak peek inside the new \$250 million Morongo Casino, Resort & Spa. They heard speeches, watched a ribbon cutting, toured the property and sampled the buffet.

Gamblers get their first glimpse at 7 a.m. Monday when the 27-story building opens to the public. Only some of the 2,000 slot machines will be hooked up.

Tribal chairman Maurice Lyons glanced around the new casino where slots sit quietly and without a light flashing.

As a boy, his family stuffed paper into window cracks to keep out the howling wind and burned kerosene lamps until electricity finally came to the reservation.

"This, to me, is a dream come true for our tribe," he said before taking the stage. "I don't want any of my people to have to go back to that time."

Many touring the resort Wednesday see a big boost for the local economy.

"I think the city would kill for something like this," said Jack Holden, executive director of the Banning Chamber of Commerce. "All we can do is guess, but I know it's going to have a huge impact.

"There's an economic engine that's going to start running and it's going to be phenomenal."

Inland Empire economist John Husing estimates that the casino and other tribal business holdings will pump \$1.3 billion into the region's economy over a five-year period ending in 2008.

The casino resort is expected to draw about 2 million visitors annually - about 200,000 more people than now live in Riverside County.

Big stars appearing at private events before the Dec. 10 grand opening will put it on the map. They include Jay Leno, Carlos Santana and R&B star Beyoncé.



Amanda Lucidon / The Press-Enterprise
Construction work continues at The Pit Bar at Morongo Casino, Resort & Spa, which is costing \$250 million to build.

a-day poolside cabanas with flat-screen televisions and sandy beaches. Relax with \$120 massages in sage-scented surroundings. Drink at a "skybar" and dance the night away in a three-story club with room for 1,500 people.

Convention goers will gather in the resort's 11,553-square-foot ballroom. In all, there are 3,400 parking spaces on the ground and in a five-level garage.

Guests enter the gaming resort shaded by a porte cochere - a steel canopy shaped like petals of a radiant desert bloom. It represents the union of earth and sky.

Once inside the casino, wagering awaits.

By the Dec. 10 grand opening, the 148,000-square-foot casino will feature 2,000 slot machines, 70 table games, five California-style Craps tables (dealt with cards instead of dice), a 2,400-square-foot poker room and high-rollers will try their luck in privacy with 20 special tables, 210 slots and their own food and beverage service.

During Monday's "soft" opening, only some of the slots will be operating, along with the buffet and 24-hour coffee shop. The hotel and other restaurants should be open by the Thanksgiving holiday.

Rise of Gaming

Over the last 128 years, the reservation landscape has changed dramatically since the federal government carved out a tribal home in a mountain pass.

In 1890, a congressional commission called the expanse of sagebrush, dry washes and rocky terrain "worthless" land.

But now, tourists and gamblers will pay top dollar for a resort experience.

They'll stay in \$450-a-night suites with panoramic mountain views. Lounge in \$50-



Hard Times

Tribal elders still remember the 1930s, when reservation life meant an open-ditch irrigation system for farming. Many recall abundant apricot orchards. As they eked out an existence, tribe members often ran cattle.

Over the decades, unemployment and welfare dependency still ran high.

But all that changed about 20 years ago with Indian gaming.



The tribe opened a modest bingo hall in 1983.

Later, the tribe expanded gaming by opening Casino Morongo, which now offers 2,000 slot machines. It will be converted to a bingo facility.

Today, the tribe has diversified its economic holdings.

The Morongo Band of Mission Indians now operates an Arrowhead bottling plant, a Shell gas station, an A&W Root Beer and Coco's restaurants. The tribe has also acquired Hadley Fruit Orchards.

A co-generation plant is going up on the reservation and will power the new casino resort.

Michael Potts, director of sales for the casino resort, promotes the property with tour operators and travel writers across the country.

"It's California close," he said. "There's no need to fly or drive to Las Vegas."