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Glacier Peaks Casino is a success in rural Montana

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Photos by Tony Bynum/courtesy Glacier Peaks Casino -- The Blackfeet Tribe recently opened the largest casino in rural Montana, complete with Elvis (Kole Larson) and all-Native Las Vegas-style showgirls.

BROWNING, Mont. - The Blackfeet Tribe recently opened the largest casino in Montana, complete with Las Vegas-style showgirls. Its size won't compare with other casinos throughout Indian country, but its quality and innovations are state of the art; and in lightly populated, rural Montana, it stands alone. Plans for expansion are already being discussed and by the end of 2007 it could be dramatically larger.

Gary Green is general manager for the casino. Green has extensive experience in the gaming industry dating back to the 1970s in Atlantic City, with later positions in California and Las Vegas. He helped build a casino for the Ottawa Tribe in Miami, Okla., and managed another near Oklahoma City. He is one of three non-Native people on the staff of 336 that work at Glacier Peaks Casino.

The Blackfeet Nation has a federally chartered business development corporation that manages the nation's business developments. This corporation, named Siyeh, is thus a separate entity shielding business operations from local politics so consistency is maintained. The Siyeh board hired Green last April after construction had already begun to expand the vision beyond a bingo hall and even beyond a typical casino.

It was evident to Green that different marketing strategies were needed to attract substantial numbers of gamers, as the area for many miles around is reservation and lightly populated. However, it's also near the eastern border of Glacier National Park, which draws several million visitors a year and people whose annual incomes are well above the national average. It's also relatively close to Calgary, Canada, a city with a population greater than the entire state of Montana and an Asian population larger than that of San Francisco's Chinatown. "These huge markets were out there," Green commented. The challenge then was how to attract them.

"We put in 500 slot machines. We put in table games which weren't in the original plans, and we examined the bingo hall. You typically can't get as much return on a given amount of space with bingo as with slots," Green explained. "We looked at bingo halls in Italy where it's all the rage, and saw these high-tech halls with neon and flat screen televisions and nice chairs to sit in. The bingo ball blowers were Plexiglas with neon and all kinds of high-tech stuff. We put in a bingo hall that is state of the art with really high stakes. We have some insured games that give away \$100,000. Now we can aim bingo at a different demographic."

Focusing on the Asian market in Calgary caused changes in the machines themselves. "The number 8 is a lucky number to Asians so we changed all the traditional 7s to 8s. Red is the color of good fortune to them as well, so we designed the machines in red and added dragons and lotus blossoms and other Asian symbols. The writing is also bilingual in both English and Chinese: all ways of attracting the Asian community.

"So far it's been an overwhelming success," Green said. "On weekends about 40 percent of the people on the floor are from Canada or more than 100 miles away, outside the area. This casino deposits more in the bank each day than the old bingo hall deposited in a month."

To focus on the affluent gamer, the restaurant was designed to act as three restaurants within one space. A high-quality buffet runs from 11 a.m. until 5:30 p.m., and then it's transformed into a gourmet restaurant for the evening hours. "It's probably the finest gourmet room in Montana," Green commented. Then the late-night restaurant is operated as a short-order grill to serve that crowd and truck drivers passing through.

"For the grand opening we had flying Elvis impersonators and 10 of them parachuted into our parking lot. We also have our own Elvis impersonator who walks the floor on weekends. The showgirls are all Native ladies and they're dressed with feathers and typical showgirl costumes."

Employees are also treated very well. There's an employee dining room where employees can eat for free. The day care center for employees' children is state-certified, operates around the clock and is free as well. A bus system operates on the reservation to provide free transportation to work and home should employees need it. "We've also created very few minimum-wage jobs and those jobs are mostly tip positions where they're getting some pretty good tips," Green added.

The casino has been so successful in such a short time that a feasibility study to look at expansion has been commissioned. "We're planning a 200-room hotel off one end and a large convention facility/auditorium on the other end," Green said. "We're also adding an RV park because studies have shown that many visitors to Glacier travel in RVs. It will be a high-tech park with cable TV, wireless Internet and a community center.

"[The] economic impact to the reservation is phenomenal and it's already becoming the snowball to allow other businesses to develop in the community," Green said. He credited the foresight of the board to reach out and build something beyond the norm. "It's an exciting project," he commented.

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