

CASINO: CLOSEUP

GLACIER PEAKS CASINO



MONTANA'S FIRST VEGAS-STYLE CASINO

By Christine Snyder

Browning, Mont., is probably the last place on earth you'd expect showgirls, Elvis impersonators and customized slot machines. In the kind of juxtaposition that can only work with casinos, the new Glacier Peaks Casino has all those things and more.

Glacier Peaks, located in the northern Rockies at the entrance of Glacier National Park, is the Blackfoot Nation's, and the state's, first Las Vegas-style casino. "It is one of the most beautiful spots in the country," according to Gary Green, general manager. "Even in July I can look out the window and see snow-capped mountains."

The property is built out of native timber and features a stone fireplace in the lobby. "It's one of the most gorgeous properties I've ever worked in," Green said. "It has this rustic lodge motif to it."

That initial appearance is where "rustic" ends, though. The

casino features 500 slot machines, table games and a gourmet restaurant. Vegas-style costumed showgirls and an Elvis impersonator prowl the floor in the evenings as hosts. "It's a miniature Las Vegas right here in the midst of Montana," Green added.

The property didn't start out that way. Glacier Peaks was initially a modest Bingo hall. The tribe, one of a handful that federally charters a corporation — the Siyeh Development Corporation — to handle all its business development, initially gained funding to expand the Bingo hall and its snack bar. "But the board of directors of the Siyeh Corporation, their vision was greater than just expanding the Bingo hall," said Green, who came in the midst of the expansion construction in April. "We turned the initial plans on their head."

The Bingo hall did in fact get expanded, but, Green said, "It's not your grandmother's Bingo hall. We went with an entirely new concept of Bingo."

The hall is heavily inspired by European — especially Italian — Bingo halls, and features a neon and plexi-glass ball blower, electronic tables with imbedded flat screen televisions and flat screen television monitors throughout. “You walk in and think ‘Star Trek,’” Green said. “You wouldn’t recognize it as a Bingo hall.”

The Bingo hall snack bar expansion turned into a three-in-one restaurant for the casino. In the evenings, it’s a gourmet restaurant, late-night and morning it is a grill, and in the afternoon it is a buffet catering mostly to the bus customers. The next phase of development will include a hotel attached to one wing of the casino and a convention hall attached to the other. An R.V. park is also planned to accommodate park visitors.

Like many native casinos, the initial plan was to serve the local and extended local community. The board decided they could be more. “We want to serve that local need, absolutely, but we want to be more, and geographically they are positioned so they can do that,” Green stated. First of all, the casino is located at the eastern entrance to Glacier National Park, which attracts 12 million visitors annually. It is also three hours from Calgary, Canada, which, according to Green, “is definitely busing distance.”

“When I ran the Trump 29 in California, at that time 60 percent of our business came from bus traffic from Los Angeles — and that was three hours away,” Green continued. “I’ve applied that model here.” Glacier Peaks is attracting customers from Calgary and also the nearer Canadian town of Left Bridge.

To entice the Canadians, Green said they give an on par exchange rate. Tax-free cigarettes are also a strong incentive to Canadians used to doling out \$9 per pack on their home turf. There is also a large Asian population in Calgary that Green said the casino worked hard at attracting. “It has one of the largest Asian communities in North America; its Chinatown is bigger than San Francisco’s.” Green said Video Gaming Technology (VGT) was commissioned to manufacture customized slot machines that would specifically appeal to that Asian market. They changed the western lucky “7” into the eastern-friendly lucky “8.”

“Secondly, in Asian culture, the color red is considered a symbol of good fortune,” said Green, who added that VGT

installed bright red glass in the machines. The themes were also changed to more oriental themes such as dragons and lotuses.

The Canadian market needed to be bused to the casino, but Green said the casino decided not to get into the transportation business. “We are running this busing program differently than many casinos. Rather than operate these buses ourselves and get into that business of being a bus company, we contract out the bus business totally.” The casino gives riders strong incentives equal to or greater than the bus fare. “We provide incentives for riders on the bus based on their play. For example, if they get on the bus in Calgary for \$20, when they get off the bus I give them \$20 in playable credits or maybe a buffet, too, so they came out ahead.” Green said the casino receives two or three bus loads of passengers each day and that this segment of the customer base is steadily increasing.

Getting the word out was particularly challenging in a state where “casino” means any establishment with a few video poker machines. “Montana has a gaming law that allows any bar, anyone who has a liquor license in the state to have 22 video poker machines,” Green said. “So every bar in this state has a sign hanging that says ‘casino.’ For example, the town I’m living in has a population of 3,019 people and has seven ‘casinos.’ But honestly they are 7-11s with a bar and a few machines.”

The biggest challenge, according to Green, was combating the “so what?” reaction from people hearing about a new casino opening. “What we had to do in the state is reach out with some television and print ads and say we’ve opened a ‘real’ casino — the only real casino in the State of Montana.”

It seems to be working. The Saturday before this interview, Green’s hourly floor survey found 40 percent of the people on the floor came from more than 100 miles away. “Which means our outreach is working.” Green said he spoke with one couple in the restaurant who said they go to Las Vegas a couple times a year, but were glad they could now come to Glacier Peaks. “That is what the board set out to do and what I set out to do, and we did it.” **NAC**

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