

Longtime gaming holdout, Navajos open first casino

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — Long a behind-the-scenes player in the gaming industry, the Navajo Nation is now set to open its first casino in the hopes slot machines, poker and bingo will bring in much-needed revenue to the tribe and jobs to its people.

The doors to the Fire Rock Casino, just east of Gallup, N.M., will open to the public on Wednesday. Set against the backdrop of red rock formations, the casino represents new territory for the Navajo Nation, which only slowly followed the path trod by so many other Ameri-

can Indian tribes.

Navajos twice voted against legalizing gambling on the reservation, in 1994 and 1997, over concerns it would bring increased social ills and drain the pockets of impoverished Navajos, before it was approved.

Billboards along Interstate 40 in western New Mexico declare, "your odds are about to change."

"We're just barely getting started, but I sense that a lot of tribes are afraid of Navajos getting into gaming, being as large as we are," said Navajo Vice President Ben Shelly.

The casino is expected to generate \$32 million in annual revenue for the Navajo Nation, about a fifth of the annual tribal budget, which doesn't include federal money. In 2006, gaming brought in more than \$25 billion to the 225 tribes that have casino or bingo operations in 28 states, according to the National Indian Gaming Association.

"Some people like it because it's going to be a source of employment and revenue for the tribe," said Harry Walters, a Navajo historian and cultural anthropologist. "On the other hand, it's also addicting; the

people are going to be losing money."

Low-stakes gambling has always been a part of American Indian culture. For the Navajo, that takes shape in card games, dice games or the shoe game. According to Navajo lore, a wintertime dispute between daytime and nighttime animals culminated with the shoe game that was played to determine whether humans would live in darkness or in light. Tribal members play the game during the winter months, with some betting on the side.

Gambling also has deep cul-

tural resonance for Navajos, whose oral tradition includes stories warning about the dangers of overindulging in gambling. Many feature a character known simply as The Gambler, whose skill wins him nearly everything in the universe but nearly costs him his life.

It's a familiar story throughout the Hopi and Zuni reservations as well, said Steve Peretti, an addictions counselor in Zuni, N.M., "that people who gamble are going to lose."

But for a reservation plagued by poverty and an unemployment rate that hovers around 50

percent, tribal leaders are looking to casinos as an opportunity to spur economic development on the vast reservation that stretches into New Mexico, Utah and Arizona.

In anticipation of casinos, the tribe had a feasibility study done in 2005 to identify prime locations. A gaming enterprise was set up to oversee the development of casinos, tribal lawmakers discussed how revenues would be shared with host communities, and compacts were signed with Arizona and New Mexico.

Lawmakers lament new gaming regulations

TULSA, Okla. (AP) — New federal regulations on electronic bingo games will cost Oklahoma's tribal casinos millions of dollars more than a flawed economic study predicted, the head of the Oklahoma Indian Gaming Association said.

OIGA Chairman David Qualls said the regulations were a last-ditch effort by a lame-duck National Indian Gaming Commission to act on so-called Class II gaming without congressional oversight.

The gaming commission's regulations also drew strong criticism from U.S. Rep. Tom

Cole, R-Okla., a member of the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma.

"I am deeply concerned about the NIGC's ongoing reliance on flawed and incomplete data to justify irresponsible and unnecessary regulations on Indian tribes," Cole told the Tulsa World's Washington bureau.

"I look forward to a new commission being appointed and I sincerely hope they do not exhibit the same hostility towards the Indian gaming industry that is the legacy of the current commission."

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