

Casino fuels Umatilla Reservation resurgence

PENDLETON (AP) — A giant tower crane rising above the Wildhorse Resort & Casino has become an unlikely emblem for eastern Oregon's Umatilla Indian Reservation.

It's part of a \$45 million, 10-story upgrade of the casino and hotel east of town scheduled for completion in September.

The growing complex and a handful of other tribal enterprises mark the reservation's growing role as a regional economic engine — a complete turnaround from what locals call "B.C." (Before Casino).

"What's going on at the reservation is driving what's going on in Pendleton," said Umatilla County businessman Wesley Grilley, owner of Grilley Management Services in Pendleton. "There is a hell of a lot of action going on out there."

Now one of the county's largest employers, the Confederated Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla tribes have taken a dramatic leap forward with 1,460 workers, a \$35 million payroll and a \$190 million operating budget.

That contrasts to B.C., when the reservation's work force was

159 with a \$2.5 million payroll and \$7.5 million operating budget.

The yearlong, 184,000-square-foot resort expansion is expected to add 116 new jobs, most of them permanent, full-time positions, said tribal spokeswoman Tiah DeGroff. Wildhorse encompasses an RV park, 18-hole golf course and Tamastlikt Cultural Institute in addition to the casino and hotel.

"They call this the new 'white buffalo' — gaming," said Wildhorse general manager Al Tovey. The rare white American bison sacred to many Native Americans is a fitting metaphor for the tribes' newfound prosperity.

The B.C. era ended Nov. 5, 1994 — the day Wildhorse Casino opened off Interstate 84 under the management of Capital Gaming International Inc. of Atlantic City, N.J.

The tribes assumed management after five years, and gaming revenues have played a significant role in the drop in reservation joblessness from 37 percent in 1994 to the current 13 percent, according to tribal

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figures.

While the tribes won't reveal the casino's annual gaming revenues to the general public, the resort's Wildhorse Foundation donates 3 percent of casino proceeds to worthy causes, and that amount totaled \$628,000 last year, DeGroff said.

December unemployment in Umatilla County, the last month for which figures are available, was 9.6 percent, compared to 10.6 percent statewide, said state labor economist Dallas Fridley.

One reason may be the multiplier effect of the reservation's payroll, which is spent and respend through the local economy.

"The money is a new thing for us," said Tovey, whose heritage is Cayuse and Nez Perce. "For years, we never had anything to spend."

The casino's initial success "was a big surprise for a lot of us," said Wildhorse CEO Gary E. George. "Who was going to come to eastern Oregon?"

But within the first month and a half, 25,352 people visited the Wildhorse, which opened in a modest modular building while the larger 40,000-square-foot casino was built nearby. The gaming initially was limited to cards, bingo and slot machines, and the absence of Las Vegas-style gaming, glitz and glitter drew chuckles from some gamblers.

The laughter died when Wildhorse's gaming revenues soared 50 percent above expectations in the first month with almost no tribal advertising. Slot machines alone paid out \$488,500 in the first 14 days.

The most recent annual count showed 750,000 patrons last year. Most visitors come from a radius of about 100 miles, many from Yakima and the Tri-Cities, Wash.

The casino's success has been a shot in the arm for merchants in Pendleton, population 21,000.

Parley Pearce, co-owner of the 106-year-old Hamley & Co.

saddle shop and western store downtown, vividly recalls a beautiful and flamboyant Las Vegas card player sweeping into his store, flush with winnings from one of Wildhorse's three annual high-stakes poker tournaments.

"She laid down several thousand bucks," Pearce said.

An unexpected upside to Wildhorse's success has been a return of Native Americans to the 273-square-mile reservation. Tribal enrollment now stands at 2,787, up from 1,492 in 1994.

Many live on or around the reservation, which also is home to 300 native people enrolled in other tribes and 1,500 non-Indians, reservation statistics indicate.

"People are moving back home," said Marcus Luke, vice chairman of the tribes' governing General Council. Luke is of Umatilla, Walla Walla, Cayuse and Yakama descent who has lived near the reservation all his life.

Among those coming home is 46-year-old Lisa Ganuelas, who was raised on Washington's sprawling Yakama Reservation,

where her father grew up. Ganuelas' mother spent her childhood on the Umatilla Reservation.

Wildhorse "provided employment and made it possible for me to move to my mom's reservation and get to know my family on that side," said Ganuelas, the Umatilla Reservation's public and legislative affairs director.

Without Wildhorse, she'd probably be living and working in Seattle or Portland, she said.

Still, enrollment remains well below the estimated 8,000 Umatilla, Cayuse and Walla Walla tribal members who lived on a 6.4 million-acre Northwest homeland before the European contact.

In the meantime, the casino continues to thrive. It expanded in 2002 and 2005, and the latest renovation will add 202 new rooms to the hotel and 24,000 square feet to the casino.

The new hotel tower is designed to soar above the rolling Blue Mountain foothills where the tribes once grazed thousands of Spanish mustangs on the wild ryegrass.

Athlete honored for tribal, school achievement

RENO, Nev. (AP) — In basketball, success is usually celebrated with the ceremonial cutting down of the net to mark a championship.

But on a recent Saturday at the University of Nevada, Reno's Lawlor Events Center, success on and off the court was celebrated through a traditional Native American gifting ceremony seldom, if ever, seen in a college basketball arena.

Tahnee Robinson, a senior guard on the UNR women's basketball team, received a Pendleton blanket from the Pyramid Lake Veteran's and Warriors Association in honor of her community service with Native Americans in northern Nevada.

"It's a tradition," said Michelle McCauley, university intertribal higher education coordinator. "If someone is given one, then it means that they've done something very special. It's a very high honor."

The ceremony was a part of a celebration of local Native Americans in conjunction with the Feb. 26 Wolf Pack women's game against the New Mexico State University Aggies.

Finding camaraderie can be difficult for Native American students at UNR. There are only 173 self-identified Native American students out of 16,681 students at the school, according to McCauley.

McCauley she hopes that events such as the ceremony held Saturday can help invigorate Native American

students and forge links with local Native American communities.

"It is a challenge finding community because many of the students don't know anything about their songs, traditions, or languages," McCauley said. "I've heard the term of 'walking in two worlds' and that's what Native Americans at UNR have to deal with: adaptation."

The pre-game ceremony featured a performance of the "Shoshone Flag Song" by Gale Hanson of Bishop, Calif. The Pyramid Lake Veteran's and Warriors Association, also known as "Namu Tookwasa," performed an honor guard presentation.

"Namu Tookwasu" means people of the black shirts," McCauley said. "It's what the Paiutes called the cavalry when they first came to the area with the settlers."

Native American Student Organization President Chelsea O'Day also performed the "The Star Spangled Banner" prior to the start of the basketball game.

During halftime, a Native American hoop dancer performed on the court and the group Echo Sky performed pow-wow music.

For each game attendee, Wolf Pack head coach Jane Albright donated \$1 to Nike N7, a program that provides funding to get American Indian and Aboriginal communities in North America involved in sports.

Nike produces special N7 products and the proceeds from sales fund grants and sports programs in Native American communities, according to the Nike

N7 website.

The first 500 children to come to the marketing table received a Nike N7 T-shirt and the team wore apparel from the Nike N7 collection during the game, Albright said.

Nevada is the only NCAA Division I-A women's team that has a partnership with N7, she added.

Robinson was given the Pendleton blanket on the court before the game, but a more formal ceremony was held afterwards.

Albright said the event to honor Native Americans started because of a relationship the UNR basketball team has forged with the local Native American community through Robinson.

Robinson is a Shoshone tribe member from Fort Washakie, Wyo., and is one of the few Native Americans competing in NCAA basketball.

"Our team is very diverse, and we're interested in the progress of all of our players," Albright said. "We learn from all of their unique experiences what they have had to offer."

Robinson, a general studies major, transferred to UNR from Sheridan College in Wyoming in 2009 and was named Western Athletic Conference Newcomer of the Year and first team all-WAC last season, according to the Nevada Athletics website. She also is a current semi-finalist for the Sullivan Award for the 2010-2011 season.

Decision favors tribe in casino dispute

PHOENIX (AP) — A federal judge has upheld a decision to designate land as a reservation, possibly opening the door to a tribal casino near Glendale's sports and entertainment district.

The Gila River Indian Community, Glendale and state legislative leaders had sought to overturn the U.S. Department

of Interior's decision last year to take 54 acres into trust for a southern Arizona tribe.

The Tohono O'odham Nation aims to build a casino, resort, shops and restaurants on 54 acres near 95th and Northern avenues.

It was unclear Thursday how quickly the tribe would begin

construction. Glendale officials and other opponents plan to appeal the judge's decision Thursday.

The Arizona Republic says it's not immediately known if the U.S. Interior Department would take the land into the reservation system before all appeals were exhausted.



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Bill would allow video slot machines

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — A state senator has filed legislation that would legalize video lottery games, a form of slot machine, in Texas.

Sen. Juan Hinojosa, a Democrat from McAllen, authored the bill that would allow video lottery terminals in race tracks and Indian reservations.

As the state faces a \$15 billion to \$27 billion budget shortfall, lawmakers are looking for ways to bring in much-needed revenue.

Texans spend millions on gambling in other states. Hinojosa said allowing the machines in Texas would pump millions of dollars into a struggling economy, drive job creation and boost tourism.

He said the legislation would create more than 77,000 new jobs in 40 different industry sectors. Many conservative groups oppose expanding gambling in Texas. Similar measures have consistently failed in previous legislative sessions.