

Improvements begin at casino

By Brent Merrill

Smoke Signals staff writer

Spirit Mountain Casino is receiving a facelift and several much-needed and delayed upgrades in the coming months.

"We have lots of projects," said Spirit Mountain Casino General Manager Stan Dillon. "The council approved up to \$8 million for a multitude of different capital projects for 2015."

Tribal Council passed a resolution in February authorizing the capital expenditures.

Casino guests will see some of the improvements and some they won't.

The two most visible upgrades to the property are the new exterior paint and the refurbished parking lots.

The improvements most people won't necessarily see are the remodeled kitchen and the upgrades to the casino's information technology system.

"One of the projects is in the IT infrastructure," said Dillon. "There are a lot of upgrades to be done behind the scenes and they need to be done to protect our systems."

"Those IT upgrades were things we put in this package that we just needed to catch up on," said Tribal Council Chairman and Spirit Mountain Gaming Inc.'s Board Chairman Reyn Leno.

One of the main IT systems needing upgraded was the slot machine system.

"We put a lot of emphasis on that to make sure it's protected," said Dillon.

The upgrades to the IT system are scheduled to be completed by October.

The casino also will be getting 150 new slot machines out on the floor.

"We have been trying to upgrade our product for the last five years," said Dillon. "We didn't buy a lot of machines when the economy was down. So today, to make sure we are competitive with everybody, we are making sure that we get the machines in."

"A lot of what we are doing is just catching up on what we have done during a bad economy," said Leno. "We had been putting things off and now it's time to catch up on a lot of maintenance and things like that. I think it is important to point out that during tough times we made the commitment to keep as many people working as possible and we put off projects so we could make sure that we did that."

Part of the upgrades to the gaming floor will include new chairs at the slot machines and table games.

"When you are talking about guests' comfort level, the guest has to be comfortable sitting there," said Dillon.

Dillon said the chairs are larger and have better back support, and are therefore more comfortable. He said the chairs are a key component to making a guest's gaming experience more pleasurable.

"We are getting all new ones," said Dillon. "We are getting 1,850 slot machine chairs and 175 table

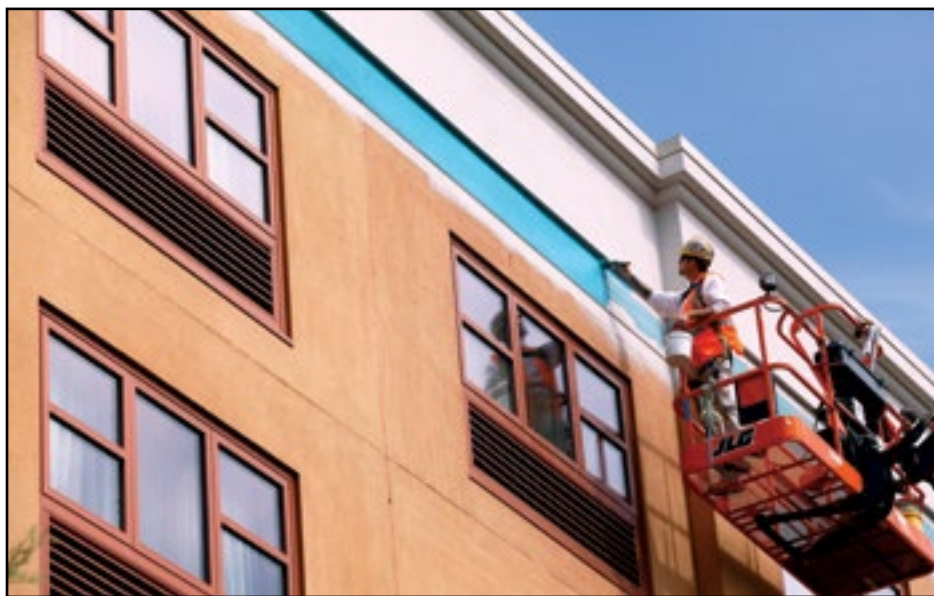


Photo by Michelle Alaimo

The exterior of Spirit Mountain Casino receives a new coat of paint on Tuesday, May 19. The exterior paint job is just one of several improvements happening at the casino.

games chairs."

Dillon said guests should be seeing the new chairs soon.

"We should have a signed contract any day now and it usually takes about 10 weeks to get those manufactured and delivered," he said.

Behind the scenes, a kitchen remodel has been taking place for about a month and is nearly complete.

"We had some pretty major work done in the kitchen areas," said Dillon. "What facilitated this remodel project was plumbing issues mainly."

Decaying pipes that were almost 20 years old in some cases were replaced, as well as new ceilings and light fixtures were installed. Much of the kitchen equipment also was replaced.

"You're talking about original kitchen equipment that was at the end of its life," said Dillon.

The kitchen has been modified to make the operation more efficient. Renovation efforts concentrated on the kitchen that serves the sports bar because it also serves the Rock Creek Deli, the Poker Express kiosk on the gaming floor and the employee dining room.

"That kitchen is huge and handles a lot of volume," said Dillon. "There is a lot of food that comes out of that area. It has been tough over the last five weeks to have that down, but for what it handles that needs to be an efficient kitchen. It now has a much better work space for the employees."

The casino kitchen areas now have the latest fire suppression systems and the new flooring is slip-resistant.

"One of the key things in all of this is there is much more safety," said Dillon. "We replaced all the fire suppression systems. They have all been updated to the newest and greatest to make sure that any fire would be put out immediately. We have newer floors now that are slip-resistant and we have better lighting and it is just an overall better work space for our employees. The kitchen remodel was about safety, improving the working conditions and increasing how fast we are able to serve our guests."

"There were really some safety issues for our employees down there," said Leno. "That is one of the reasons that got done first because it was a priority for safety and after it was completed to provide faster service and better quality product."

One of the more visible changes at the casino won't really be a change at all. The exterior paint will remain the same color scheme only it will be receive an updated, fresher look.

After looking at different artist's renditions that would have seen the casino painted different colors, it was decided the colors currently in use would remain, but be bolder and brighter.

"The off-white color in the first rendition just didn't have the same appeal and the more modern colors chosen for the second rendition made it look like an apartment complex or a shopping mall, and we didn't want to go with that," said Dillon.

"My belief was that these colors and the representation that we have today have been good for 20 years so we decided to stick with the current colors. In order to enhance the building, we went with a darker orange and a brighter blue. It is much more intense color and more clean and bright. It looks clean."

Dillon said the exterior work appears to be getting done on time and potentially under budget.

"Everything looks to be on time with the painting," said Dillon. "The rain slowed us up a few days, but so far everything seems to be on schedule."

The upgrades to the casino parking lots, like the exterior painting, are weather dependent but so far moving along smoothly, said Dillon.

"The parking lot overlay is a huge

process because we can only take down so much of our lot at any one time. We are going through all the lots and cutting out the bad spots and patching those areas."

Dillon said once the problem areas of the parking lots are patched, the lots will get a new overlay. The casino property's outer lots will receive a sealer coat to protect them from any further damage and the new overlay will be focused on the main parking lots and throughways.

Lastly, the list of projects at Spirit Mountain that have not been started yet includes a renovation of the current host office area. Dillon said that guests end up having to line up because of the small area and that is not the representation he wants for guests using that host station.

"We are looking at more than doubling the size of the office," said Dillon. "We are going to take one of the walls out and extend the area across the back."

Dillon said everything is going as planned with the projects and he said there are many reasons to do the upgrades now.

"We are doing good based on our projections," said Dillon. "So far it looks like everything is getting in under budget, which is good because when you get into these types of projects you never know what you are going to find."

Dillon sees the capital expenditures not only as a chance to upgrade the casino in many different areas, but he also sees the projects as a measure of protection for the future.

"If someone wanted to know why we are doing all this, the fact is we are 20 years old now and it is one of those things where we really want to protect our building and to take care of it," said Dillon.

"It's important that we stay competitive and if we are going to say we are the premier casino in Oregon then we don't want to have paint peeling off the building and holes in the parking lot. We need to be doing that preventive maintenance, it goes a long way. The message we send is 'we care.' It's really important to take care of it and maintain our presence as a premier destination."

"I think we have to be prepared in case there is competition because we want to be a premier casino," said Leno. "We have always had a commitment to excellence and I don't think that has ever changed. We have other projects coming in 2016 that will hopefully complete the renovation of our casino." ■

Graduation ceremony set for June 19

The Education Department's Graduation Ceremony will be held at 6 p.m. Friday, June 19, in the Tribal gym.

Dinner will be provided. The ceremony will recognize Grand Ronde students who have reached an educational milestone in K-3 Chinuk language class, eighth-grade, high school, GED completion, certificates and college. If you graduated or will be graduating in the 2014-15 academic year, contact Education via e-mail at education@grandronde.org or call 503-879-2275 or 800-422-0232, ext. 2275. ■