

'I think it is pretty incredible'

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The new buffet instantly became the largest in Oregon and the second story of the building became offices for casino administration, executive staff and the Gaming Commission. The Events Center's movable walls can be closed to provide multiple areas for meetings, receptions and banquets or opened up completely for concerts, prize fights and other large-scale entertainment events.

Over the years the caliber of entertainment featured at Spirit Mountain Casino has been stellar and the property continues to draw big name stars. Star attractions like Jay Leno, Crystal Gayle, Rita Coolidge, Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, Merle Haggard, Faith Hill, Tim McGraw, Chris Isaak, Trisha Yearwood, Chris LeDoux, B.B. King, Boz Scaggs, Dana Carvey, Paul Anka, Gladys Knight, George Benson, Patti LaBelle and John Legend have performed at the casino. This year, country singer Martina McBride will perform for the casino's 20th anniversary at 8 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 17, as part of her "The Everlasting Tour."

Former casino General Manager Rodney Ferguson says he was particularly proud of the top draws that have made their way to Spirit Mountain.

"John Legend sold out in two days," says Ferguson. "We were trying to reach out to the Portland audience by bringing in rhythm-and-blues acts and rock acts that could add excitement to the property. We found out what people really liked and we used the drawing power of the casino to make the shows affordable. John Legend brought a whole new audience to the casino."

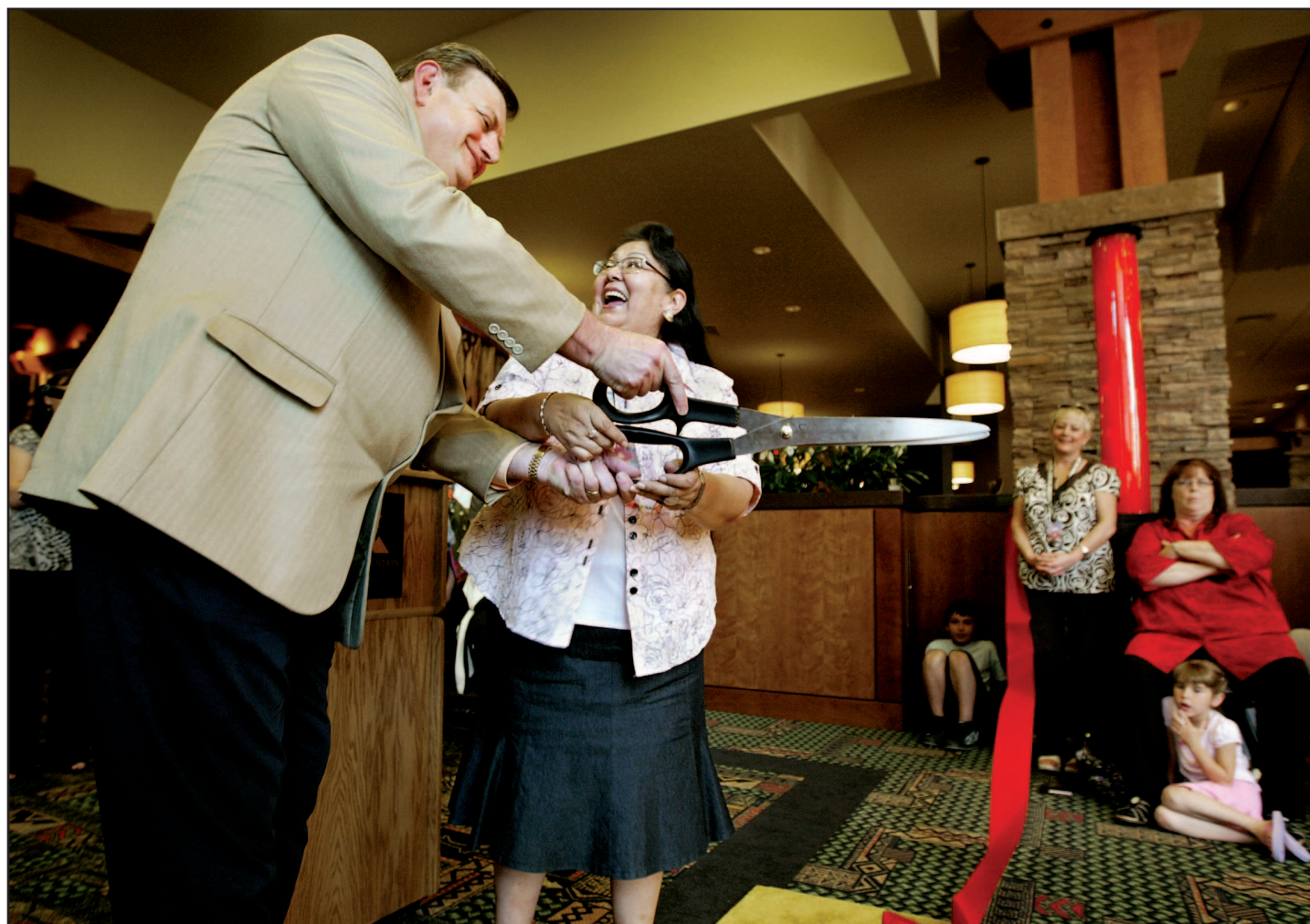
Mercier says he remembers the first wave of big city folks making their way to Grand Ronde for entertainment.

"What tripped me out most about the casino was all of a sudden you started seeing all these Portlanders coming down," says Mercier. "People were all dressed up and coming from Portland for a real night out in Grand Ronde. You never thought in history that someone would say that, but the casino created that opportunity."

Tribal leaders are unanimous in expressing their amazement at the quality of top level performers who have made their way over the years to perform at Spirit Mountain Casino.

"We have had some very big names here in Grand Ronde and I think it plays to who would have ever thought this could happen in Grand Ronde," says Leno. "I think it is pretty incredible."

"I could have never imagined when I was growing up out here, kicking rocks down the gravel roads, that Jay Leno or Willie Nelson would be standing on the property that was just an open field," says former Tribal Council Secretary Toby McClary. "I would have laughed at you if you said that those people would



Smoke Signals file photos



Spirit Mountain Casino Interim General Manager Roy Rhode, above left, and then-Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy smile after cutting the ribbon during the opening ceremony of the southern expansion to the casino on May 15, 2008. The expansion included the new 450-seat Cedar Plank Buffet and 2,000-seat Events and Entertainment Center. At left, singer Rita Coolidge (Cherokee) performed during the Tribe's 25th Restoration Celebration at Spirit Mountain Casino's Events Center on Nov. 22, 2008.

have been standing on the property 20 years from the days when I was growing up. It's pretty unbelievable what we have going on down there on that property."

In August 2007, the casino opened the new free-standing PlayWorld Events Center adjacent to the lodge.

On May 23, 2009, the casino opened the Mountain View Sports Bar, which features a 100-inch projection screen television and 15 plasma screens for guests to watch sporting events while enjoying food and beverages.

"It took us a while to get the sports bar going because we didn't want to just close down the whole area," says Ferguson of the Mountain View expansion. "So it took a while, but it turned out very nice. I'm really proud of that project."

Ferguson, who now lives and works in Virginia, also says he was proud of the way the renovation of many of the rooms in the lodge turned out when that project was completed under his watch.

"We renovated 109 rooms that hadn't been done in some time," says Ferguson. "We wanted to transform those rooms into something that not only captured the flavor of the Northwest but the feel of the Tribal aspect as well. We got very positive responses from our guests. We wanted to make them nice and give them a Las Vegas feel. We wanted to make them more

contemporary and give the guests something to remember us by.

"We tried to do the same thing with the restaurants as well when we renovated them and when we put the new carpet in. When you have 2 million people coming to the property annually, you want to freshen the look once in a while and give it a higher energy feel."

Casino bolsters economy

Over the years, Spirit Mountain Casino has become the largest employer in both Polk and Yamhill counties. Almost 375 people work for the Tribal government and more than 1,200 people work for Spirit Mountain.

"There is only 12 percent Tribal members who work at the casino so that is a huge thing for the community surrounding us," says Giffen. "We like to give Tribal members all the opportunities we can, but we don't have enough Tribal members to do it (operate the casino) ourselves."

McClary agrees that the community has been strengthened by the employment opportunities provided by the casino.

"That means that 88 percent of the workforce at the casino is community members," says McClary. "So we are not only providing opportunities for Tribal membership, but we are also embracing the outside community. In many cases some of those folks would have had to

relocate, move somewhere else, leave their homes and look for work outside the community they live in to continue to provide for their families. So having the casino and the Tribe present really offered them the opportunity to stay home and be with their families and provide for their families."

"I think we have a lot of good workers," says Leno. "I think our employees – whether they be past or present employees – have led to the success of our casino and they still do today. They are the ones that do the work."

Larsen says he and other Tribal leaders never imagined what Spirit Mountain Casino has become was even possible when they started the project. He says the plan was to start a bingo hall like the Poarch Band had established in Alabama.

"We knew it was going to be good for the Tribe," says Larsen. "We were told when we first started that the income could be as much as \$16 million annually if everything went well. Then it went to \$23 million that first year. It's been a good ride for the Tribe. The medical and health care is just unbelievable."

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