Spirit Mountain Casino wraps up remodel

By Brent Merrill
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Spirit Mountain Casino has a new look after an 82,000-square-foot, $13 million remodel project that was just completed in time to make a public statement.

Spirit Mountain's recently completed remodel project was timed to be finished before the opening of the new Cowlitz Indian Tribe's ilani Casino and Resort 15 miles north of the Portland metropolitan area in Ridgefield, Wash.

Spirit Mountain Casino General Manager Stan Dillon said the property's new theme is "Tried, True and Totally New" for the remodel launch that was approved by Tribal Council in November 2015 and started in May 2016.

"We are complete," said Dillon while touring the remodeled casino floor. "We're doing final walk-throughs to look at the fine details."

Dillon said the project was "very aggressive" in that the casino remained open throughout the remodel construction and was completed ahead of schedule.

Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Spirit Mountain Casino's remodel includes new carpet, lighting displays and ceiling fixtures giving the casino an entirely new look and feel.

"It was a real challenge and scary because something like that can really affect your revenue and that was one of my biggest fears going into the remodel of the casino," said Dillon. "We formulated a plan to help minimize that and part of that plan was to take the existing poker room and move it."

As part of Spirit Mountain Casino's remodel, the Poker Room is now located in The Peak gaming area.

Dillon moved the poker room to The Peak and used the former poker room as a staging area to move banks of slot machines like chess pieces. He said using that space to stage each individual section in while those areas were shut down and remodeled turned out to be key in getting the project completed ahead of schedule.

Dillon said that logistical strategy shaved weeks off the final completion date and that contractors improved as they went along.

"We just kept staging all through the casino with the goal of it being a one-year process because of the sheer size of the project," said Dillon. "As we started going we started getting our production down and the sections we remodeled got bigger and that helped speed us up. We took a one-year project and sped it up to seven and a half months, which is unbelievable to me."

Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno said people have been telling him that they like the new design.

"I think the remodel really gives you even more of a Las Vegas-style gaming facility," said Leno. "It is very updated and very clean. It is a nice place to go out. We want to keep the place where people want to come and have a good experience."

Dillon selected I-5 Design and Manufacture Inc. of Lacey, Wash., to do the remodel project. I-5 Design has been in business since 1985 and the company started as I-5 Signs and grew into a multi-million dollar company that specializes in designing and remodeling retail spaces.

Dillon said he wanted to get out ahead of the impending competition and have the vast remodel of Spirit Mountain completed before the Cowlitz Tribe opens its casino.

"I wanted the guests to come to Spirit Mountain and see what we look like today so that if they go up to the Cowlitz property to see it, it may look nice and it might look different, but it isn't going to be that much nicer than we are. That was my goal," Dillon said.

Dillon said he is particularly proud of the newly designed area known as The Peak. He said it is now the largest non-smoking casino room in Oregon and that the room now has its own bar with an exclusive menu, a cashier cage, a marketing stage, the poker room, the keno desk, and a variety of slot and table games.

"This is now one of my favorite rooms," said Dillon.

Dillon said adding the new north entrance and opening up that area to as many as 200 more slot machines has not only raised revenue from the floor but provided a much-needed clearing of the smoke that used to gather in that end of the building. He said adding the new entrance also changed the parking structure of the parking lot and that a once hardly used area is now a busy area of the property.

"We were able to increase the air flow and we increased the traffic flow through the building," said Dillon. "It's not as smoky as it was and players are more dispersed now and that really improved the air flow."

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Leno said the positives from the new entrance area are going to add up quickly.

"We put 200 more machines out on the floor by adding that back entryway," said Leno, who also sits on the Spirit Mountain Gaming Board of Directors that runs the casino. "I think putting that entrance out there by the highway was a big improvement – probably one of the most cost-effective moves we did down there. I think that was really one of the best improvements we made."

As he walked through the remodeled property, Dillon pointed out a new ceiling lighting system that allows him to control the colors and movement of the ceiling from an iPad in his desk. He said he can change the patterns and colors to fit any theme the casino is hosting. For instance, he can turn the ceiling green, for example, on St. Patrick's Day if he desires.

The property boasts a brand new lighting scheme as well. The lighting is brighter than it has been in the past 20 years and guests have noticed.

"I want the casino to have the ability to change. I want that flexibility," said Dillon. "We can change the color of that ceiling to any color in the spectrum in a second. We can create motion. It really is open to the imagination."

Leno said guests have noticed the difference in the lighting.

"The older people I think really enjoy it more lit up," said Leno. "It really has brightened up the place and it looks nice."

Without officially changing the name, Dillon has essentially created the Martha Jane Sands' Cedar Plank Buffet by moving one of the Tribe's most visible pieces of art.

Dillon said he moved the iconic Tribal statue of Sands to the entrance of the Cedar Plank Buffet. He had the statue raised off the ground and the walls to the buffet opened up to make more of a showcase for the statue than it had in front of the Legends restaurant entrance.

"My goal was to put Martha up in a place where she could be up in the air because it is a beautiful statue," said Dillon. "We have that spot to try to elevate her and make her more prominent. I've gotten a lot of compliments and people are glad she has her own area like that."

Dillon said he had a picture of Sands with her prized baskets blown up to make a 3-by-5-foot canvas print that now hangs in the entrance to the buffet waiting area.

Dillon said he will bring in other historic pictures of Sands to hang in the area and that the long bench seat will be removed and replaced with large, comfortable chairs for people to sit in while they wait to be seated.

"Now my goal is to improve the lighting and put a fountain in there (next to the statue)," said Dillon. "She is becoming the focal point of this whole area."

Now that the casino remodel is complete other than a few fine details, Dillon said he will turn his attention to Spirit Mountain Lodge. The casino's board of directors has asked him to go forward with remodeling 100 rooms.

"We have 250 rooms and we have only remodeled 140," said Dillon. "What we need to do today, especially with new competition in our market – they are going to build a hotel and we know that. It's going to be the same size and it's going to be a strong competitor so in order to maintain our guests and our VIP guests, we need to refresh the product and we need to look at that."

Dillon said it will be his goal to bring the lodge up to the standards of the rest of the property now that the casino remodel is complete.

"That would maintain us as a premier destination and competitor," said Dillon. ■