

General Council hears positive casino report

By Dean Rhodes
Smoke Signals editor

Eighteen months after losing the coveted position of being the closest casino to the Portland-Vancouver metropolitan area, things are going well at Spirit Mountain Casino in that they are nowhere near as bad had some estimated.

In April 2017, the Cowlitz Tribe opened its Ilani casino 16 miles north of the Portland metro area and right off heavily traveled Interstate 5.

Original estimates of the financial impact that Ilani would have on the Grand Ronde Tribe’s casino on Salmon River Highway were staggering, ranging from a 34.4 percent to a 41.3 percent decrease in revenue.

In 2017, casino management budgeted for a 27.8 percent decline in revenue in anticipation of Ilani’s opening. Between May and September 2017, the casino saw a 13.7 percent decrease. And for the last quarter in 2017, revenue was down only 6.4 percent.

Spirit Mountain Casino General Manager Stan Dillon delivered a lot of good numbers during his 41-minute presentation to the membership at the Sunday, Sept. 9, General Council meeting.

Dillon said the casino has seen revenue exceed budget by 2.6 percent through the first seven months of 2018 and revenue is only 1.8 percent behind 2017.

More importantly, dividend sent to the Tribe to fund the government and membership programs so far

this year is 12.5 percent higher than anticipated.

But all is not good news. The casino is still dealing with difficulty in hiring staff, which is affected by the state’s historically low 3.9 percent unemployment rate and wage competition exacerbated by the casino’s location 25 miles away from a major population center.

Dillon reported that Ilani is also affecting the Oregon State Lottery, which is down 15 percent overall and even more in the north Portland area.

“They are a major competitor and will continue to be a major competitor,” Dillon said, noting that Ilani will eventually build a hotel to complement its casino.

Casino Marketing Director Shawna Ridgebear said that Coyote Club membership has only declined 5.2 percent in its “battle zones” since the opening of Ilani and that projected customer declines based on location have not been as severe as expected.

For instance, it was estimated that the casino would see a 44.3-percent decline in customers from Portland; in reality, the decline is a notch below 20 percent. And the good news is that Salem clients are actually increasing thanks to Spirit Mountain marketing efforts in the state capital.

Ridgebear said the casino has worked to retain VIPs through targeted database marketing and aggressive retention programs,



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Spirit Mountain Casino General Manager Stan Dillon answers questions after the casino update was given during the General Council meeting held in the Tribal Community Center on Sunday, Sept. 9.

and the casino is helped by offering participation games that are not yet available in Washington state.

She added that the casino will attempt to book more tribute acts in 2019, such as Neil Diamond tribute band Super Diamond out of Portland. She reported that the Sept. 15 Three Dog Night concert at the casino has sold out.

Gaming Operations Director Lon O’Donnell continued the casino presentation by reporting that the casino has 175 new slot machines, 127 upgraded slots and that 402 slots, or 23 percent, have been improved in some manner.

The casino also has brought back popular card game Spanish 21 and single-deck blackjack, and now uses hand-held keno devices, which speed up the process threefold.

He also touted the new Viz Ex-

plorer system, which has casino employees responding to broken slot machines and jackpot winners faster than industry average.

Dillon added the Spirit Mountain Lodge will remodel 105 of its oldest rooms and create eight mini-suites and update 14 existing suites. A second phase will remodel and update the remaining 127 rooms. Lodge remodel work will start after Jan. 1.

Dillon fielded three questions and comments from the membership.

In other action, it was announced that the next General Council meeting will be held at 11 a.m. Sunday, Oct. 7, in the Tribal Community Center, 9615 Grand Ronde Road.

Election Board Vice Chair Michael Mercier delivered the 2018 Tribal Council results, which saw incumbents Cheryle A. Kennedy and Jon A. George re-elected and returned former Tribal Council member Steve Bobb Sr. to the nine-member governing board.

Eric Bernando, Sean Gerbrandt and Jonathan R. George won the \$100 door prizes and Kristina Helfrich, Gary Shortt, Joanna Brisbois, Victor Cureton and Robert Wiggs won the \$50 door prizes. Wiggs donated his winnings to the family of Margaret Provost, who walked on on Aug. 30.

Bernando and Tribal Council Secretary Jon A. George performed the cultural drumming and singing to open the meeting.

The entire meeting can be viewed by visiting the Tribal website at www.grandronde.org and clicking on the News tab and then Video. ■

2018 FISH & WILDLIFE COMMITTEE ELDERS FISHING TRIP

SEPT. 29, 2018

POSTPONED

NEED YOUR TRIBAL FISHING LICENSE?
Contact: Natural Resources Division 503-879-2424

RAIN OR SHINE EVENT! DRESS APPROPRIATELY

- A picnic lunch will be provided by the committee
- The trip is limited to the first 25 Tribal Elders and spouses who sign up at the Elders Activity Center or by calling 503-879-2233
- We encourage those riding in the vans to please arrive by 7:45 a.m. to load the vans and leave at 8 a.m.
- Join us even if you don't fish but would like to attend to enjoy the view and outing.

Sign up sheet at the Elders Activity Center 503-879-2233