

Casino planned ahead to ensure safety

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employees are required to wear masks.

Employees also stand outside all entrances to inform guests of the additional safety measures, such as the age restriction of not allowing anyone under the age of 21 in the casino or Spirit Mountain Lodge properties, and requiring masks at all table games

Spirit Mountain Casino Advertising Manager Angela LaBarbara was on the casino floor Monday morning and said everyone seemed happy to be back.

“They seem happy to be able to get out of the house and do something,” she said. “People have also been good about following the social distancing rules. What we’re hoping to do is keep everyone safe. We were over a month in planning this and wanted to make sure everything was going to be easy to understand.”

At the slot machines, every other machine has been turned off with “out of order” signs on them, along with chairs being removed so that people don’t sit down in the unoccupied areas. Canisters of hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes are available on the casino floor. Chairs and couches have been removed from hallways and lobbies as an additional safety precaution.

The Cedar Plank Buffet has been revamped as well, with disposable menus and tables moved six feet apart. Instead of patrons making their way through an often-crowded line and handling utensils others have touched, they are served a choice of different three-course meal options.

“It’s more like a casual dining establishment now,” LaBarbara said. “We are serving you. We redid the menu to keep the favorites that everyone loves, so you still have some of the buffet feeling.”

Spirit Mountain has called back most of its workforce, having to only



Photos by Timothy J. Gonzalez

Guests walk past Rock Creek Court during Spirit Mountain Casino’s re-opening to the public on Monday, June 1. At left, food workers wear protective masks in the Cedar Plank Buffet.



no was able to accommodate everyone.

“We spent a great deal of (time) planning to ensure that we were prepared from various situations. However, it has been a great day as it has gone very smoothly so far. We couldn’t be happier with the efforts of our team and the smiles on our guests’ faces,” Ridgebear added.

By 9 a.m. Monday, Armond and Millie Pilotte of Sheridan had finished having breakfast and were on their way to the slot machines.

“We usually come here about three times a month,” Armond said. “I don’t gamble, but I bring my wife so she can use the slot machines while I read my book.”

“I was going through withdrawals when the casino was closed,” Millie said. “I used to come here every week and I love the different slots.”

Millie said she was grateful for the additional safety precautions because she suffers from COPD, but she cannot wear a mask as it makes breathing more difficult.

“I think the safety precautions are good,” she said.

furlough poker employees because the game cannot be offered and still follow social distancing rules. It was also one of only two casinos nationwide that paid its employees in full during the shutdown: The 1,100 employees have been receiving their usual paychecks plus consideration for lost tips during the 74-day closure. Casino employees were granted 400 hours – 10 weeks – of extra paid time off to ensure they continued receiving a paycheck.

“The excitement of the day started bright and early as the eager staff of Spirit Mountain Casino opened our doors at 6 a.m.,” Marketing Director Shawna Ridgebear said. “We had about 50 guests who were up extra early to be here with us first thing. We heard numerous ‘Great to see you’, ‘Thank you for opening’ and lots of ‘We missed you!’”

She said as the morning progressed, the guest counts increased and with the help of staff, the casi-

“We try to be respectful of others as everyone has different opinions,” Armond added.

Cheri Main and Maggie Cohron of West Salem were celebrating a belated birthday party Monday morning. Cheri planned to visit Spirit Mountain on March 17, but decided to postpone the trip due to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. The casino closed the following day.

“We’ve been very excited to come back,” Main said. “Everything seems to be really good so far and I feel very safe here.”

Cohron said the two typically visit Spirit Mountain Casino once a month.

“We missed it a lot,” she said. “This is our big outing and our place to go.”

Spirit Mountain Casino is in Polk County, which is one of the counties that Gov. Kate Brown gave permission to begin re-opening on Friday, May 22. However, Oregon Tribal casinos are not subject to state law as they are operated by sovereign nations.

Three other Oregon Tribal casinos re-opened during the week of May 18-22: Coquille Indian Tribe’s Mill Casino in North Bend, Siletz Tribe’s Chinook Winds Casino in Lincoln City, and Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians’ Three Rivers Casino in Florence and Coos Bay. The Cowlitz Tribe’s Ilani Casino north of Vancouver also opened the last week in May.

A blessing and cleansing ceremony was held Tuesday, May 26, before the re-opening and included Tribal Council members and Cultural Resources Department staff members.

“We’re excited to welcome our guests and employees back to Spirit Mountain Casino,” said General Manager Stan Dillon in a press release. “We have used this closure as an opportunity to make improvements throughout the property. We want all of our visitors to experience the best of Oregon’s premier gaming destination.” ■



A guest makes her way down the hallway during Spirit Mountain Casino’s re-opening to the public on Monday, June 1.