

Thomas discusses casino operations during Facebook Live event

By Dean Rhodes
Smoke Signals editor

Spirit Mountain Casino Interim General Manager Bruce Thomas briefed the Tribal membership on myriad changes occurring at the Tribe's gaming facility during a 33-minute Facebook Live event held on Wednesday, July 14.

Thomas took over at the casino on June 16, almost two weeks after Stan Dillon's resignation took effect. Previously, Thomas was the chief executive officer at Spirit Mountain Casino from 1993 to 2000.

Since taking over, Thomas has instituted several changes at the casino, including the controversial closure of the Cedar Plank Buffet as of Sunday, July 11.

In addition, youths are now allowed back at Spirit Mountain Lodge for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic became a public health emergency in March 2020, valet parking has ended and employees have seen their minimum wage increase to help remedy a critical employee shortage at the casino.

The Facebook Live event was the 19th held by the Tribal government since March 2020. Approximately 140 people logged on to watch the broadcast, which included Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy and Human Resources Director Camille Mercier.

After giving a brief summation of his resume, Thomas detailed the reasoning behind closing the popular buffet, which included staffing



Photo by Timothy J. Gonzalez

Spirit Mountain Casino Interim General Manager Bruce Thomas gives an update on casino operations during a Facebook Live event held in Tribal Council Chambers on Wednesday, July 14.

shortages, losing money and new public health concerns.

Thomas said that the buffet lost \$2.2 million in 2019 and \$4.6 million between June 2020 and May 2021 as the price of protein, such as meat, chicken and seafood, skyrocketed during the pandemic. To break even, the casino would have had to increase its buffet charge to \$60 per person for dinner.

He also said the COVID-19 pandemic has changed attitudes toward buffets.

"Buffets generally and multiple people touching utensils and food ... people look at issues like germs, bacteria and viruses differently today than they did a few years ago," he said. "There was nothing positive about it that we could see."

The approximately 100 employees who worked at the buffet have been transferred to other casino

restaurants, which were about 100 employees short, and are helping to keep those eateries open. "We really had a crisis situation," Thomas said.

Thomas said a "food hall" will take the place of the buffet and feature multiple food outlets, including authentic Asian offerings.

He also explained the cessation of valet parking. It cost the casino \$760,000 a year or more than \$2,000 a day to park an average of 46 cars daily, or \$45 per car. Thomas added that after the top 230 customers were questioned, only two said they used valet parking.

"It's important, I believe, for the Tribe and the Tribal members who are our shareholders that we make all of our decisions in a way that maximizes the long-term benefit to the casino," Thomas said. "That makes us competitive, desirable and maximizes profit."

Mercier said other changes at the casino are aimed at attracting and retaining casino employees, including an increase in the minimum wage to \$16, offering a \$250 quarterly perfect attendance incentive, paying bonuses for referrals and new hires, and offering gas cards to employees who must drive to work.

"We're looking at some things that benefit the employees because we are in a market where it is important to attract and retain our team members," Mercier said.

"And it's not going to be inexpensive," Thomas added.

In response to the lone question, Thomas said the casino will not reinstitute the bus shuttle that brought customers from Portland to the casino because it was not cost-effective.

Another COVID-19 relief payment

Kennedy also announced that Tribal Council has decided to distribute more COVID-19 Relief Program funds to Tribal members on Aug. 13. Adults 18 and older will receive \$4,000 and minors 17 and younger will get \$1,000.

Tribal members and parents and legal guardians must request a form from Member Benefits Administrator Liz Leno at 503-879-2082 or Member Services at 503-879-2116 to receive the payment. Deadline to submit the form is July 30.

The one-time distribution will be a general welfare payment and nontaxable, Kennedy said.

"This general welfare payment is to help ease the continued financial burden of COVID-19," Kennedy said. "We're very pleased that we are able to assist our Tribal members. We know that the pandemic has hit our members very hard."

In 2020, adult Tribal members received eight COVID-19 Relief Program payments that totaled \$4,400.

In closing, Kennedy again encouraged Tribal members to get vaccinated against the COVID-19 coronavirus especially since the Delta variant is increasing case numbers throughout the country. ■



TRIBAL VETERANS SERVICE OFFICE

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VETERANS CRISIS LINE, CALL 1-800-273-8255 AND PRESS 1 OR TEXT 838255

VETERANS CORNER, JULY 1, 2021:

E-mail CTGRTribalVSO@grandronde.org to register for events and training!

All CTGR veterans send us your e-mail address so we can include you on the monthly CTGR Veterans Newsletter Distribution List and periodic e-mail information updates.

UPCOMING EVENTS:

July 21 & 22, 2021 (Virtual)
Veterans Virtual Claims Clinic

Brought to you by U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Your Service. Our Mission.

Bringing the VA benefits home event into your community. Contact Event POC to schedule an appointment. During the event, you can:

- Speak with a VA representative.
- Get answers to VA claims and benefit questions.
- File your claim.

Event Point Contact of Virtual Claims Clinic:
Ramona Quenelle
Tribal Veterans' Service Officer
Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde

To schedule an appointment Phone: 503-879-1484
or Email: CTGRTribalVSO@grandronde.org

July 24, 2021
Veterans Service Office – Gun Lock Event

TVSO will have a booth at this event handing out gun locks to veterans. There will be opportunities to win prizes and meet some of our veteran partners.

Sept. 2, 2021 at 2 p.m.
Mindfulness Behavioral Health Training #3

Sept. 17, 2021 at 2 p.m.
Cultural Class #2 – Cattail Cordage

Nov. 12, 2021 at 5:30 p.m.
Veterans Day Dinner

SAVE THE DATE CALENDAR:

Aug. 2021 (Date/Time TBD)
Paint with a Vet event (only 22 spots available)
E-mail CTGRTVSO to register.

Sept. 2021 (Date/Time TBD)
VISN Network Presentations – Meeting #3

Oct. 2021 (Date/Time TBD)
Native Wellness Behavioral Health Training #4

Dec. 2021 (Date/Time TBD)
Veterans End of the Year Event

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

VIETNAM VETERANS - AGENT ORANGE EXPOSURE?

The list of conditions presumed to be caused by Agent Orange exposure has recently expanded. Whether you were on land, air or sea, you may be entitled to compensation from the VA.

Blue Water Navy: Agent Orange Presumptive Exposure in the Republic of Vietnam.

1. Are you a Vietnam veteran (includes military, naval, or air service) who served in the Republic of Vietnam between Jan. 9, 1962, and May 7, 1975?

2. Did you serve aboard a vessel operating not more than 12 nautical miles seaward from the demarcation line of the waters of Vietnam and Cambodia?

3. Do you have one or more of the Agent Orange presumptive conditions listed below: IHD, type 2 diabetes, Parkinson's disease, respiratory cancers, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, Hodgkin's disease, multiple myeloma, soft tissue sarcomas, prostate cancer, bladder cancer, hyper thyroidism, etc.

Contact the Tribal Veterans Service Office for more information.

