

Written by Administrator  
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PENDLETON -- A giant tower crane rising above the

[Wildhorse Resort & Casino](#)

has become an unlikely emblem for eastern Oregon's Umatilla Indian Reservation.

It's part of a \$45 million,

10-story upgrade of the casino and hotel east of town scheduled for completion in September.

The growing complex and a handful of other tribal enterprises mark the reservation's growing role as a regional economic engine -- a complete turnaround from what locals call "B.C." (Before Casino).

"What's going on at the reservation is driving what's going on in [Pendleton](#)," said Umatilla County businessman Wesley Grilley, owner of Grilley Management Services in Pendleton. "There is a hell of a lot of action going on out there."

Now one of the county's largest employers, [the Confederated Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla tribes](#) have taken a dramatic leap forward with 1,460 workers, a \$35 million payroll and a \$190 million operating budget.

That contrasts to B.C., when the reservation's work force was 159 with a \$2.5 million payroll and \$7.5 million operating budget.

The yearlong, 184,000-square-foot resort expansion is expected to add 116 new jobs, most of them permanent, full-time positions, said tribal spokeswoman Tiah DeGrofft. Wildhorse encompasses an RV park, 18-hole golf course and Tamastslikt Cultural Institute in addition to the casino and hotel.

"They call this the new 'white buffalo' -- gaming," said Wildhorse general manager Al Tovey. The rare white American bison sacred to many Native Americans is a fitting metaphor for the tribes' newfound prosperity.

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## **Joblessness plummets**

The B.C. era ended Nov. 5, 1994 -- the day Wildhorse Casino opened off Interstate 84 under the management of Capital Gaming International Inc. of Atlantic City, N.J.

The tribes assumed management after five years, and gaming revenues have played a significant role in the drop in reservation joblessness from 37 percent in 1994 to the current 13 percent, according to tribal figures.

While the tribes won't reveal the casino's annual gaming revenues to the general public, the resort's [Wildhorse Foundation](#) donates 3 percent of casino proceeds to worthy causes, and that amount totaled \$628,000 last year, DeGrofft said.

December unemployment in Umatilla County, the last month for which figures are available, was 9.6 percent, compared to 10.6 percent statewide, said state labor economist Dallas Fridley.

One reason may be the multiplier effect of the reservation's payroll, which is spent and respent through the local economy.

"The money is a new thing for us," said Tovey, whose heritage is Cayuse and [Nez Perce](#) . "For years, we never had anything to spend."

## **Gaming revenues brisk**

The casino's initial success "was a big surprise for a lot of us," said Wildhorse CEO Gary E. George. "Who was going to come to eastern Oregon?"

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But within the first month and a half, 25,352 people visited the Wildhorse, which opened in a modest modular building while the larger 40,000-square-foot casino was built nearby. The gaming initially was limited to cards, bingo and slot machines, and the absence of Las Vegas-style gaming, glitz and glitter drew chuckles from some gamblers.

The laughter died when Wildhorse's gaming revenues soared 50 percent above expectations in the first month with almost no tribal advertising. Slot machines alone paid out \$488,500 in the first 14 days.

The most recent annual count showed 750,000 patrons last year. Most visitors come from a radius of about 100 miles, many from Yakima and the Tri-Cities, Wash.

The casino's success has been a shot in the arm for merchants in Pendleton, population 21,000.

Parley Pearce , co-owner of the 106-year-old Hamley & Co. saddle shop and western store downtown, vividly recalls a beautiful and flamboyant Las Vegas card player sweeping into his store, flush with winnings from one of Wildhorse's three annual high-stakes poker tournaments.

"She laid down several thousand bucks," Pearce said.

## **Tribal members return**

An unexpected upside to Wildhorse's success has been a return of Native Americans to the 273-square-mile reservation. Tribal enrollment now stands at 2,787, up from 1,492 in 1994.

Many live on or around the reservation, which also is home to 300 native people enrolled in other tribes and 1,500 non-Indians, reservation statistics indicate.

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"People are moving back home," said Marcus Luke, vice chairman of the tribes' governing General Council. Luke is of Umatilla, Walla Walla, Cayuse and [Yakama descent](#) who has lived near the reservation all his life.

Among those coming home is 46-year-old Lisa Ganuelas, who was raised on Washington's sprawling Yakama Reservation, where her father grew up. Ganuelas' mother spent her childhood on the [Umatilla Reservation](#).

Wildhorse "provided employment and made it possible for me to move to my mom's reservation and get to know my family on that side," said Ganuelas, the Umatilla Reservation's public and legislative affairs director.

Without Wildhorse, she'd probably be living and working in Seattle or Portland, she said.

Still, enrollment remains well below the estimated 8,000 Umatilla, Cayuse and Walla Walla tribal members who lived on a 6.4 million-acre Northwest homeland before the European contact.

### **Latest plans set**

In the meantime, the casino continues to thrive. It expanded in 2002 and 2005, and the latest renovation will add 202 new rooms to the hotel and 24,000 square feet to the casino.

The new hotel tower is designed to soar above the rolling Blue Mountain foothills where the tribes once grazed thousands of Spanish mustangs on the wild ryegrass.

"You will be able to see forever from the 10th floor," George said. "You can see Mount Hood, Mount Adams and Mount Rainier."

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The rooms were badly needed, he said -- the hotel has never had an addition before now and fills up in summer and must turn away guests during poker tournaments, Native American events such as the annual July Pow-Wow and the century-old [Pendleton Round-Up](#) .

The tribes plan to market Wildhorse further afield than ever before -- to Boise, Spokane, Portland and Seattle, he said.

Wildhorse also is putting on a new "family friendly" image, with a children's arcade, a new indoor-outdoor swimming pool and a four-theater, 775-seat cinema complex under construction. The cinema will include two theaters with 3-D screens.

"Our customers are excited, are employees are excited," Tovey said. "This is the big time for us."

-- [Richard Cockle](#)

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