

Puyallup Tribe's new mega casino will be Vegas on I-5 when it opens in 2019

Written by Administrator
Tuesday, 24 July 2018 19:54 -

Move over Narrows Bridges and T-Dome, Tacoma will soon have another landmark.

This one will glow at night.

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Come December 2019, a new casino with all the bling of Las Vegas will open along Interstate 5.

That's the assessment of the Puyallup Tribe as it builds its new \$370 million Emerald Queen Casino.

The tribe presented an update on the project to the Tacoma City Council on Tuesday. The 110,000-square-foot casino inside the 310,000-square-foot building will rival the size of other casinos in the state, the tribe said.

The building, with its striking designs, art, lights and electronic messaging, will create an Indian casino with the glitz of Las Vegas.

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“That’s what we started out to do,” Puyallup Tribal Chairman Bill Sterud said.

The building will span both East 29th and East R streets. Its massive presence already is a hulking presence along the freeway.

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“You hate to say gaming is going to identify Tacoma,” said general manager Frank Wright. “But gaming will identify Tacoma when you drive down the freeway and see this building all lit up with the LED boards and being beautiful.”

The casino will have restaurants (buffet, upscale and cafe) and two bars. A sports bar will have a view of Mount Rainier, and the other bar will overlook downtown Tacoma and Puget Sound.

A 2,000-seat, 21,000-square-foot events center will incorporate cedar paneling, evocative of a tribal long house.

“It’s an extraordinary space,” said council member Catherine Ushka. “I can’t wait to see how it’s used and the level of performances we’re going to attract to the greater area.”

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The structure features two parking garages — one of which is already operating — with a total of 1,370 stalls.

The new casino will incorporate tribal art and designs throughout, said architect Brett Ewing of Cunningham Group Architecture.

The exterior will feature metal panels in a design reminiscent of basket weaving.

The current electronic billboard will be updated.

“This building is going to be very vibrant at night,” Ewing said. “It’s going to be a jewel along I-5.”

Council member Conor McCarthy welcomed the new development.

“I’m so impressed that this is going to happen in our city,” McCarthy said. “Make it as big and bright and beautiful and sparkly as possible because we need it. And as much bling as possible.”

TIMING WAS RIGHT

Sterud called the cooperation between the city and the tribe “outstanding.”

It hasn’t always been that way, he noted. Just 15 years ago, city government sentiment was against a large casino in the middle of Tacoma.

“The timing just wasn’t right then,” Sterud said. “Since then, we’ve come a long way. We can see the value of this casino we’re building.”

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Sterud said the project will increase tourism and jobs. The new casino is expected to add 200 jobs to the 2,100 currently employed at the tribe's existing casinos.

Tribal Vice-Chairman David Bean noted the casino will have a high visibility on I-5 and capture an ever-increasing Puget Sound population as well as travelers.

"We see a growing market and demand," Bean said.

Bean said the tribe hopes to attract more high end gamblers.

By December 2020, some of those travelers will be staying at the tribe's new attached \$65 million hotel. The hotel site, east of the new casino, still is in the planning phase.

The tribe is aiming for a 3.5 to 4 star hotel with 150-200 rooms and a rooftop restaurant. Plans also call for a spa and conference rooms.

A mega casino had long been in the tribe's plan, Wright said, but the tribe had turned down earlier opportunities.

The tribe didn't have the capital to make a large casino feasible. Casino management companies, mostly based in Nevada and Canada, wanted 40 percent of earnings.

"We wanted to keep all the money that was made at the casino in Tacoma," Wright said.

The tribe first jumped into gaming with the Emerald Queen riverboat in 1996. The public tracked the progress of the boat as it made its way from the Mississippi River, through the Panama Canal and eventually to the Port of Tacoma.

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The tribe then built a bingo hall in 2002 where the current I-5 casino stands, eventually converting it to gaming and adding three large tents — today's configuration.

"A lot of people walking through don't realize those are tents," Wright said. "And tents have a life(span)."

In 2004, the Port of Tacoma wanted to shut down Alexander Avenue in an expansion. The tribe bought a hotel in Fife, converted it to today's casino and hotel and shut down the riverboat.

The boat and its attendant building are still in place. The parking lot is used by the tribe for its annual July 4th fireworks vendor village, Firecracker Alley.

When the new casino opens in December 2019, the current one housed in the tents will be shut down. The tents will eventually be demolished, tribal staff said.

"Those tents have been paid off for a long time," Wright said. "We've been able to do real well, not only helping our tribal members — we've been able to help other people in the community.

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