

How one of the world's largest casinos is planning to reopen in the wake of COVID-19

Written by Administrator
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As Rodney Butler walks through the dark halls of the Foxwoods Resort and Casino in Connecticut, he laments that the 4,500 slot machines throughout the establishment that he considers home are turned off.

It's "unbelievable," Butler said. "They should be clinging and clanging right now."

Foxwoods, in Mashantucket, Connecticut, is one of the largest casinos in the world. It's owned and operated by the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, for which Butler is the chairman. He says that up until the coronavirus, COVID-19, came to the United States, the casino had never shut its doors.

"Since 1992, we have weathered hurricanes, blizzards, power outages ... the [2008] financial crisis, and the doors have always stayed open," Butler said.

A "Wheel of Fortune" game is left in the dark at the Foxwoods Resort and Casino in Connecticut, which has been closed due to the coronavirus pandemic. A "Wheel of Fortune" game is left in the dark at the Foxwoods Resort and Casino in Connecticut, which has been closed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

ABC News

Across the country, from Las Vegas to Atlantic City, [casinos](#) are facing a risk of crumbling under the immense weight of the economic shutdown caused by COVID-19.

"Nobody's paying rent, so we have no gaming income. No lease income," Butler said. "There's no tax base here on the reservation. So it's costing us a couple of million a week just to stay closed."

Since closing, Butler said his tribe has seen unemployment numbers rise to 99% of the population as the casino provides most of the reservation's jobs. Six weeks ago, the casino furloughed 5,000 of its employees' jobs.

"It's impossible to work at home when it's a one-on-one interaction and I'm serving you a meal

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or I'm dealing you cards and showing you a great time," Butler said.

In Las Vegas, a similar barren scene where padlocks adorn casino doors. The iconic fountain at the Bellagio Resort and Casino, with its soaring choreographed water shows, has gone still.

Rodney Butler is chairman of the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, which owns and operates the Foxwoods Resort and Casino in Connecticut. Rodney Butler is chairman of the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, which owns and operates the Foxwoods Resort and Casino in Connecticut.

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Devon Alarid, a showgirl in Las Vegas, is now out of a job and hoping that an Instagram show she's created with other performers in the city will help their community raise money for each other.

"There's a lot of emotions around it," she said of the virus' impact on the Las Vegas economy. "It's heartbreaking. I had so many goals and plans and exciting things I was looking forward to and it all just upped and vanished."

Clark County Commissioner Marilyn Kirkpatrick told ABC News that the "top 100 employers for the entire state are in" the 6-mile area that comprises Las Vegas. She said that gaming accounts for 78% of the state's overall budget but at the moment, there's "no gaming [and] no liquor."

As states begin to reopen, these bastions of gambling, wining and dining and nightlife are preparing for the groundswell of pent up partying. Butler, however, isn't sure if it'll come.

"A lot of this is gonna be dictated by the medical professionals but, more importantly, just [the] psychology of people and how comfortable they're gonna feel going back out in public," Butler said.

Butler said the casino normally welcomes 15,000 to 20,000 people on any given day in addition to the 5,000 people who work there. With all the modes of viral transmission inside a casino — chips, cards, cash, dice and drinks — the staff is preparing with certain social distancing and decontamination measures.

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For one, hand sanitizer and sanitizing wipes are everywhere. Butler says they'll also have every other slot machine open to create some level of social distancing and that people will have their body temperatures checked as they enter the building.

"We're really enforcing social distancing. That's why some of the high-contact areas, like bingo, like the buffet — we're not gonna be opening those in the first round," he said.

Foxwoods Resort and Casino in Connecticut plans to space out open slot machines so that every other one is being used in order to allow for social distancing. Foxwoods Resort and Casino in Connecticut plans to space out open slot machines so that every other one is being used in order to allow for social distancing.

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Blackjack will be back, albeit with a large sheet plexiglass between the dealer and those playing.

"So, the partitions are in place. We're going to reduce the layout so it's three people that are playing, and that will be the max that we'll allow to play on a Blackjack table in this scenario at a time," said Bryan Hayes, vice president of analytics and slot operations at Foxwoods.

Hayes, who is one of the people that heads gaming for the casino, said the casino normally switches out cards at their tables every day. But he said that with the coronavirus pandemic, their plan is to swap out the cards "much more frequently than we do normally."

"So hourly intervals, between one hour and four hours," Hayes said. "We'll be swapping the cards out and the longest they'll be on the table is about six [hours]."

He said they're also evaluating options for the most "efficient and effective" way to clean chips.

But like most casino resorts today, Foxwoods isn't just a casino. It's also a hotel and two entertainment venues. Monique Sebastian, vice president of entertainment, says their biggest venue, which has nearly 4,000 seats and has hosted stars like Janet Jackson, Jerry Seinfeld and John Legend, will be shut down for the foreseeable future.

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Sebastian said they've already canceled all the venue's shows for April, May and June. While their first show is still scheduled tentatively for July 10, she said it really depends on whether they have a plan in place and what government officials are advising.

"We are going to have to take many preventative measures," Sebastian said of bringing people back into the venue. "There are going to be some shows ... that we're going to have to postpone until we are ready and feel confident that we can provide [guests with] the best experience possible."

Still, Sebastian believes that with time and despite the staggering setbacks, live events will bring people back together again.

"Entertainment provides something you cannot find anywhere else," she said. "It makes you feel alive. It makes you happy and sad, and it takes you back to a different place. ... It makes you relive memories."

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