

## The state's casino industry blinks back to life as Plainridge prepares to open Wednesday

Written by Administrator  
Tuesday, 07 July 2020 17:53 -

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Lance George, general manager of Plainridge, said Tuesday that it's a relief to begin to get the facility's employees back to work. At one point during the closure, Plainridge's workforce dwindled from 450 people to 20, and most workers have been laid off or furloughed since April.

But he said it is hard to know how strong business will be until the casino actually opens its doors.

"I think if you lined 10 of us up, I don't think any of us know what to expect on Wednesday," George said Tuesday as he walked the casino floor.

The partitions between slot machines — installed at the direction of the Massachusetts Gaming Commission — are the most obvious addition. About half of the 1,500 seats at the facility's slot machines are out of service in the name of social distancing.

Plainridge, which does not have table games, is the most modest of the state's casinos. But reopening still involved rethinking the casino experience to emphasize public health.

Visitors will have to wear masks, and the casino is using kiosks to screen guests for elevated temperatures. Under state reopening rules, live entertainment such as concerts remains on hold.

Mike Mueller, vice president of operations at Plainridge, said a lot of the work to get ready has involved cleaning up from a closure that the designers of the casino probably did not anticipate ever happening.

A 24-hour facility in normal times, Plainridge employees returned to find that many of the dormant slot machines were never designed to be turned off for such an extended period. When Mueller and his colleagues started to reboot them, components in some of the machines failed.

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During the shutdown, executives took turns working graveyard shifts to fill security details at Plainridge. Most of what they dealt with were curious customers coming by to see if the casino was open, but there were also a few brushes with deer and turkeys on the deserted property. The director of information technology thought he spotted a fisher cat late one night while on patrol.

Plainridge will ramp up slowly, as it tries to get a sense for what kind of business it can expect amid the pandemic. While Plainridge will be the first casino to reopen in the state, George said his main purpose is to get any kinks out before the weekend.

After Wednesday, the casino will run on reduced weekday hours of 7 a.m. to 2 a.m. on weekdays, operating 24 hours only on Fridays and Saturdays for now. The casino is preparing to resume harness racing next week, but it still has not determined whether there will be enough demand to reopen its two restaurants beyond those in the food court.

The casino's popular section for newly arrived games is usually a dense forest of machines packed tightly together, and Mueller said it was difficult to figure out what to do to keep that section's lively feel without packing guests too close together. One solution was to move some of the most-used machines away from tightly arranged banks.

Mueller showed off a low-tech tool that he used to make his calculations: a piece of lumber cut to exactly 6 feet, the minimum distance allowed between slot machines that are not separated by plexiglass. Written on the board were the words "Don't Cut." The contrivance helped him avoid the need for a second person to hold a tape measure.

Casinos in Rhode Island and Connecticut opened several weeks ago, giving them a running start on operating in a pandemic. Massachusetts casinos, however, will be able to draw on the experience of their parent companies, which operate in multiple states.

George said he is confident that Plainridge, run by Penn National Gaming, can keep its guests and employees healthy while reviving its business.

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“We’ve successfully reopened 34 properties. We’ve got a good idea of what it takes to reopen a facility — ensuring that we minimize risk,” he said.

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