

November looked good for NWI casinos, but Illinois in hole

November's

casino revenues were positive for Northwest Indiana overall, while competitors in Illinois reported negative numbers, according to a local casino official.

Majestic Star Casinos saw a 7.4 percent hike in revenues and Horseshoe Hammond had an 11 percent increase, while Ameristar in East Chicago and Blue Chip Casino in Michigan City both showed slight decreases, Larry Buck senior vice president and general manager, Majestic Star Casinos, said Wednesday.

"Illinois numbers came out, too, and they were all negative," Buck said.

He said Majestic Star's streak continues, with each month showing greater revenues than the same month the year before.

He also pointed out that the Cline Avenue bridge has been closed for more than one year.

"Now we can do an apples to apples comparison," he said.

Ameristar took in \$20.2 million, compared to \$20.4 million last November, Blue Chip raked in \$13.6 million compared to \$13.8 million, Horseshoe Hammond took in \$43.8 million compared to \$40.8 million and Majestic Star I and II took in a total of \$16.6 million compared to \$15.4 million, according to monthly numbers released Wednesday by the Indiana Gaming Commission.

Dan Nita, senior vice president and general manager of Horseshoe Hammond, cited significant growth in table games and the addition of baccarat to the floor as well as adding more lower denomination games as factors contributing to the casino's continued growth.

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Asked if they had any strategies to maintain revenues now that Illinois legislators are moving forward on expanding gambling opportunities there, Nita said he would stay attuned to what is happening there, but added "Horseshoe can withstand a lot of volatility."

Buck said there is still a long way to go before a final decision is made on gaming expansion in Illinois. Matt Schuffert, vice president and assistant general manager of Ameristar, said continuous improvement is a core business strategy at the casino and one that it will continue to maintain "with or without the full passage of expanded gaming in Illinois."

The original Empress Casino, a fixture in Hammond since 1996, is out on the open waters as it makes its way to its new owners, possibly located halfway around the world.

Harrah's Entertainment, Horseshoe's parent company, sold the riverboat to a company in India for an undisclosed sum, Dan Nita, senior vice president and general manager for Horseshoe Hammond Casino, said Wednesday.

Nita did not know if the vessel was bound for India or if it would continue to be used as a gambling boat once it reaches its final destination.

"It's on Lake Huron now and from there it's going to Montreal," Nita said of the boat, one of the first to operate as a gaming boat in Northwest Indiana in the mid-1990s when they were first allowed by state law.

The original boat had 35,000 square feet of gaming space and accommodated 2,683 passengers, according to a third year evaluation of the boat.

A fourth deck was added in the second year, which brought the capacity of crew and passengers to 3,240 and gaming square footage to 42,573, the report added.

It was replaced in 2008 by a much larger boat with more than 100,000 square feet of gambling

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