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Navajos bet first casino is a winner

N.M. operation comes after years of disputes

by [Dennis Wagner](#) - Nov. 17, 2008 12:00 AM
The Arizona Republic

GALLUP, N.M. - Eldon Etsitty deals blackjack hands to a half-dozen players, then corrects one trying to double down improperly.

"It's my table," he says in answer to a questioning look.

Cards flash. Chips clatter. Etsitty turns up a winning card for himself, and the players groan.

"They're feelin' it," he says, laughing. "Oh, they're feelin' it."

The players laugh, too, because this is only a mock game created for casino trainees. All of them will become winners on Wednesday, bringing home salaries as America's largest Indian tribe opens its first gaming operation.

The Navajo Nation is getting into the casino game late, nearly two decades after the first casinos began opening on American Indian lands, bringing wealth to tribes. The Navajos also are taking a gamble by jumping in during hard economic times.

Four Navajo casinos are under consideration in Arizona, with negotiations under way for the tribe's largest one near Flagstaff.

Robert Winter, chief executive officer of the Navajo Nation Gaming Enterprise, touts the \$30 million Fire Rock Casino, 3 miles east of Gallup, as a great hope for indigenous people mired in poverty.

"We think it's going to be one of the finest facilities," he said.

Etsitty, 28, an unemployed construction worker from Window Rock, says he'll have a full-time job just in time for his first child, due in January.

"It gives me a chance for a good life with my family," he said. Then, turning back to the card table, he flipped over an ace and chortles, "Dealer wins!"

Dire need

The Navajo Reservation, which sprawls over 27,000 square miles of Arizona, New Mexico and Utah, is bigger than 10 states and is home to about 205,000 residents.

In many respects, it resembles a Third World nation, with 56 percent unemployment and 43 percent of the people living below the poverty level.

After Congress adopted the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act in 1988, casinos started sprouting on America's 300 reservations, generating billions of dollars for destitute tribes. Nationally, tribal casinos took in \$26.5 billion last year. Fifteen of Arizona's 22 tribes have gambling halls.

But the high mesas of Arizona and New Mexico are distinct from reservations along the urban fringe, so Navajos saw less potential and greater resistance.

Twice during the 1990s, Navajo voters rejected measures that would have authorized casinos. Three times, the Tribal Council endorsed gaming development only to be vetoed by then-President Albert Hale.

Finally, in 2004, voters approved a ballot proposition. Still, it took four years to get gaming started because of political wrangling.

Through it all, financial conditions remained dismal. A 2006 economic study put per capita income on the reservation at one-quarter the national average.

The Navajo government for years relied on coal and uranium royalties for half of its general fund. Black Mesa Mine closed last year, wiping out \$20 million in revenues and 240 jobs. Other coal mines have closed. And the tribe banned uranium exploration because of high cancer rates attributed to the mineral.

Aside from agriculture, tourism is the only other industry of consequence. Although the Grand Canyon and other scenic wonders draw millions of visitors annually, the Indian nation has just 12 motels and hotels. There is so little commerce, the economic study found, that working Navajos spend 70 percent of their salaries outside the reservation.

Cultural concerns

One of the prime reasons Navajos agonized and feuded over gaming was its perceived threat to tradition and culture.

Navajo President Joe Shirley Jr. emphasizes the profit potential, saying the betting business could bring \$100 million a year and hundreds of jobs to the tribe.

At a recent conference of Native American tribes, Shirley explained the importance of casino profits to Indian nations: "I think we all know now that it takes some big money to do big things, so we're trying to do big things back on Navajo," he said.

Critics warn that the windfall may come at a cost, compounding economic and social problems with gambling addiction and crime.

Wilson Aronilth Jr., a professor of education at Diné College in Tsaile, Ariz., referred to gambling as "the devil" and denounced leaders for promoting casinos as an economic benefit. Asked where the tribe should turn for income, Aronilth said, "Washington, D.C. They should be getting money from the White people."

Edison Wauneka, an anti-gaming leader and director of Navajo Nation elections, said casinos produce "easy money."

"I don't think easy money builds character," he added. "I really still believe in the Navajo way of doing things."

Winter said the casino will be built and operated with sensitivity toward Navajo culture. Liquor will not be served in the gaming rooms. Some revenues will be set aside for counseling of compulsive gamblers. Casino revenues will help sustain a Diné tradition that includes ancient stories of wagering.

Wauneka said most of the gambling legends involve low-stakes games played for fun, not profit. One exception is the Navajo story of an evil man who used wagering skills to enslave others. When the gambler was finally defeated, he swore vengeance.

"The prophecy is that he will return one day," Wauneka said. "I guess that is true, but it doesn't mean that we welcome him back."

Hard times

Throughout Arizona, other tribes have built casinos and flourished. The state Department of Gaming reported \$2 billion in gross revenues at Indian casinos this fiscal year.

But those casinos started up in boom times.

Sheila Moraga, executive director of the Arizona Indian Gaming Association, said casino revenues statewide fell 9.5 percent during the most recent quarter, but she's still optimistic about the Navajo enterprise.

"For most people, that (downturn) would be a big hit," she said. "But it doesn't mean we're not making money."

Moraga said the Navajos are rightfully focused on the future because casinos are a long-term investment. "I think it's great," she added. "They've been working at this for a long, long time. For them, it's a very big deal."

The Navajo people already are reaping a financial windfall, leasing more than a third of their Arizona rights to slot machines to other Arizona tribes for \$130 million over 17 years.

Winter said Fire Rock will fortify tribal programs and provide seed money for more casinos.

Back at the dealer-training school, 21-year-old Samantha Johnson of Window Rock is among the more than 1,000 tribal members who applied for work in the gaming hall. Johnson said the full-time job, and maybe a casino scholarship, will help her get through nursing school.

"It's just a lot of opportunities," she added.

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Casino comparison

The Navajo Nation's new casino will have fewer slot machines and card tables than most Arizona casinos. It also will have fewer slots - the biggest casino money-makers - than its nearest competitor.

NAVAJOS' FIRST CASINO

Fire Rock Casino

Tribe: Navajo Nation.

Location: Near Interstate 40, 3 miles east of Gallup, N.M.

Market: Interstate drivers, Gallup area.

Slot machines: 472.

Blackjack tables: 10.

Poker tables: 5.

NEAREST COMPETITOR

Sky City Casino

Tribe: Acoma Pueblo.

Location: On I-40, 80 miles east of Gallup.

Market: Interstate drivers, including truckers.

Slot machines: More than 800.

Blackjack tables: 5.

Poker tables: 0.

LARGE VALLEY CASINO

Casino Arizona at Salt River

Tribe: Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community.

Location: Loop 101 and McKellips Road, Scottsdale.

Market: Phoenix-area residents, visitors.

Slot machines: 1,021.

Blackjack tables: 44.

Poker tables: 7.

Sources: Fire Rock Casino, Sky City Casino, Arizona Department of Gaming



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