

# Matamoros casino to open this month

If James Vann has his way, Matamoros will begin to resemble Las Vegas.

"It's going to be big," said the Harlingen businessman about his plan to eventually operate six casinos on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande.

Vann, along with several business partners on both sides of the border, will open their second Viva Las Vegas Casino in Matamoros on Wednesday. The casino will be the second of three Vann said will be fully operational by September, with one currently in Nuevo Progreso and another that will open there next month.

"I'm a gambler, that's what I do," said Vann, who owns an insurance agency and stock brokerage firm in Harlingen. "You've got to be pretty entrepreneurial and gusty to do it; it's not easy."

The casino in Matamoros will be on Sixth Street a few blocks from the Bennigan's, Vann said, and will have 100 slot machines and sports betting that deal only in U.S. dollars. He said anywhere from 450 to 700 people show up each day at the casino in Nuevo Progreso that's open from 10 a.m. to 3 a.m. seven days a week, and he's hoping for similar success with his second venture.

A casino in Matamoros translates to dollar signs for Mexican business owners. It also could pave the way for a casino with table gambling that could earn even more for the city, according to the president of the chamber of commerce there.

"We want them to have casinos because it would create jobs and money for the country," said Julio Almanza, president of the

Matamoros chamber of commerce. What's more, 50 percent of casino taxes stay in the municipality where they were generated, he said, and that means good things for the city. Vann has said he is hoping the Mexican legislature will soon allow more Las Vegas-style gambling, such as table gambling, in the casinos.

Brownsville also stands to benefit from increased tourism to Matamoros due to the opening of a casino, said Mike Gonzalez, director of the Brownsville Visitors and Convention Bureau. Matamoros is important to Brownsville in terms of tourism.

An attraction across the border can potentially increase hotel and restaurant revenue here, he said.

Vann agreed that the casinos have helped business on both sides of the border.

"It's had a big impact (in the) Mid-Valley," he said.

It's another way to capitalize on the Winter Texan demographic in the area, he said. Some restaurants and bars in Progreso near his casino have doubled their business since it opened.

The casino has exceeded his expectations, he said.

"I thought of it five years ago, but I didn't have the nerve," he said.

The Progreso casino has been six months in the making since he decided to do it and he said it's paying off.

"It's going to be like Vegas," he said about Progreso.