

Casinos in Nuevo Progreso, Matamoros remain closed

No bets are being placed on when the Viva Las Vegas casinos in Nuevo Progreso and Matamoros will open.

The casino in Nuevo Progreso has been closed for 11 days because owner James Vann said the building needs a transformer.

The Matamoros casino's opening, which was originally scheduled for Aug. 16, was delayed due to "electrical problems," and a tentative grand opening is not in the works. "Not right now," Vann said.

Mexican officials in Nuevo Progreso's controlling municipal entity, Rio Bravo, said the situation on their end was murky and required further investigation.

"We have to see if that person obtained a license," said José García, with the events department in Rio Bravo, in reference to Vann. He said the city has recently begun to look into whether Vann had a license for his casino to operate in Mexico.

"He had to get a license, but I don't know who he got it from," García said. "Maybe he just started without it?"

The representative of Nuevo Progreso to the municipality, Carlos Navarro, was investigating the matter, García added.

Navarro did not return calls seeking comment by press time.

Nuevo Progreso officials were not the only ones to be puzzled by the casinos, their owner and the processes involved. Julio Almanza, president of the Matamoros Chamber of Commerce, said neither he nor any chamber members ever heard from Vann or his associates.

“To date, no one from those casinos has come to us,” he said. “We’re totally uninformed about their problems.”

It’s unfortunate, Almanza said, because the chamber is supportive of the jobs and investment such a casino would create.

Vann, a businessman in Harlingen who owns an insurance agency and stock brokerage, said he began work on the casinos years ago. He’d been actively working toward opening six casinos across the border from the Rio Grande Valley since the first one opened on July 7 in Nuevo Progreso.

Legalities were always difficult, he maintained, and he said he had to “jump through some hoops” to get the machines cleared through customs and get permits.

“It was no problem once I learned the system,” he said in a previous interview, adding that he hoped to have opened two in Nuevo Progreso and one in Matamoros by September.

Vann said he “just can’t talk about them right now.”

“We’re working real hard” to open the casinos, Vann said Wednesday.

Meanwhile, would-be gamblers occasionally flock to Matamoros’ Bennigan’s asking about the casino. Nobody there knows anything about it, even though Vann said in a previous interview that the casino was located just a few blocks from there.