

# Casino eyes 5,000-seat entertainment centre

Putting more bums in more seats could be part of Niagara Fallsview Casino Resort's recipe for keeping its gamblers happy.

Falls Management Co., is considering adding a 5,000-seat entertainment centre to the casino, said casino spokesman Greg Medulun.

„Entertainment complexes are critical and important drivers for the casino industry,“ Medulun said.

Ontario Lottery and Gaming recently authorized Falls Management to hire a consultant to look into adding a new entertainment centre. Niagara Casinos president Art Frank gave hundreds of casino associates an update on the situation Monday.

Frank was chief executive officer at Casino Rama, near Orillia, when that casino built a 5,000-seat entertainment centre and hotel worth CAD 225 million in 2001.

It's still early on in the process at the Fallsview casino and there has been no decision about where it would be built or how to accommodate parking to go along with it. Likewise, there has been no decision about what would happen to the Avalon Ballroom, the 1,500-seat theatre at Fallsview that is less than three years old.

„There's no commitment from OLG or FMC to proceed with the project.

We're just at an exploratory stage at this point,“ Medulun said.

In an interview last week, Frank said one possibility for a

new centre would be to build on top of Fallsview's „bull nose," the area on top of the gambling area, near the corner of Fallsview Boulevard and Murray Street. A bigger venue than the Avalon would make more seats available for each show and give Fallsview casino and Casino Niagara better opportunities to reward their patrons.

„It's important we give our premier players a chance to enjoy the acts we do bring," Medulun said.

This year, Fallsview beefed up its entertainment, going to 230 shows a year from 126 in 2006.

About 75 per cent of tickets at the Avalon are given to the casinos' best gamblers.

„It only makes sense to put players in these seats," Frank said.

Depending on the performer, between 300 and 400 tickets are put up for sale to the general public, he said.

The casinos boast every concert at the Avalon has been sold out this year. The same goes for the hotel, which has a 100 per cent occupancy.

Everything is full because the casinos give away hotel stays and concert tickets to their favourite customers. Giving complimentary concert tickets to good customers, or „comping," is common practice at the casinos to reward high rollers and big spenders, Frank said. Mayor Ted Salci called the possibility of a new entertainment centre „exciting."

„The model really worked for them in Rama. They wanted to create critical mass," Salci said, adding he believes Frank is trying to focus on providing services to gamblers in order to strengthen business at the casinos.

A bigger venue could lead to different acts and give local residents more chance to see them, Salci said.

Even though the majority of concert tickets are now reserved for the casino's best customers, that ratio could change if there are more seats, said Salci, who noted many local people are already on the list of preferred customers.

A bigger entertainment facility at Fallsview Casino wouldn't necessarily be competition for the proposed Niagara Convention and Civic Centre, the CAD 100-million facility to be built nearby at the corner of Stanley Avenue and Dunn Street.

„If it's like the Avalon room, just bigger, I don't see that being competition for the convention centre. Our facility would be geared for trade shows and conventions,“ said Dragan Matovic, the convention centre project director.

The convention centre will have rooms capable of holding performances, but that won't be the focus of its business, Matovic said.

Entertainment and casinos have always gone hand-in-hand. Niagara's competition is making use of big-name acts to attract people.

In Niagara Falls, N.Y., the Seneca Niagara Casino opened its own 2,200-seat event centre inside its hotel last year at a cost of USD 250 million.

It could take until the fall to complete the study on whether to add a bigger entertainment centre to the Fallsview Casino, Medulun said. Neither OLG or Falls Management would say how much money is being spent on the study.

An OLG representative said the company's policy is not to release information the amounts paid to vendors.