

# Casino Queen gets ready to move inland

East St. Louis – Tom Monaghan, general manager of the Casino Queen, has on his best poker face.

In less than three weeks, the casino that has operated on a riverboat for 14 years is moving to fancier, larger quarters on the Queen's parking lot.

It will be the first of Illinois' nine casinos to move inland, but the gaming floor will still float, housed in a basin filled with 340,000 gallons of water. The rest of the facility, including five restaurants, a lobby and a gift shop, was built over dry land.

It's Monaghan's job to make sure the move is smooth.

Asked last week how he was doing, Monaghan replied, „I'll be better in 25 days.“

He manages a smile as he pats a fat binder on his conference table that lays out the meticulous plan to set up one casino while preparing to shut down another. The biggest gamble comes Aug. 2, when the casino on the boat closes at 3 a.m.

Seventeen hours later – at 8 p.m. – the new, land-based Casino Queen will open to the public. Monaghan says the new casino will be easier to access, and all the gambling will occur on one level.

The current Casino Queen, fashioned as a replica of a 19th-century sidewheeler riverboat, sits on the east bank of the Mississippi River, across from the Gateway Arch.

Crunch time for casino operators comes July 30, when workers begin moving over four days roughly half of the 1,100 slot machines from the boat to the new building. The old slot

machines will be installed alongside 547 new machines.

Most of the slots making the move are the penny and 2-cent machines, said Mitch Johnson, director of slot operations. They are the most popular with customers, he said.

While the riverboat has its charm, it is far from the grand Las Vegas-style casinos that more closely define the Casino Queen's competition in Missouri, including the USD 400 million Lumiere Place rising on Laclede's Landing. Monaghan has a nice view of the work from his Casino Queen office.

„There is no doubt that we'll have the premier gaming facility in Illinois,“ Monaghan said last week, deflecting comments about going head to head with larger casinos in Missouri, where there are loss limits. Illinois does not have such a restriction.

Two years ago, the Illinois Legislature changed the law to allow gaming boats on the Mississippi River to move to man-made basins. The Queen is the first to do so.

In Missouri, boat-in-a-moat casinos have been allowed since 1998. Nine of the state's 11 casinos – including all of those in the St. Louis area except the President Casino on Laclede's Landing – are set up that way.

The Queen, with its 1,100 workers, is the largest employer in East St. Louis, and its largest tax generator. About half of the city's USD 20 million operating budget comes from the casino. The new facility is expected to bring in USD 1 million to USD 1.5 million a year more for the city.

Monaghan said the bigger casino is expected to create more jobs, most notably in the food and beverage area. Until the casino is up and running, it is unclear exactly how many new employees will be hired, he said.

No matter how large the casino grows, the Queen has no plans

to relinquish its „Loosest Slots in the Country“ title, a trade publication honor that the casino has held for two years.

„Our marketing plan will not change,“ Monaghan said. Based on his facial expression, this was no bluff.