

# Casino resort rising at Foxwoods

While Massachusetts debates legalization of casino gambling, the gaming landscape in Connecticut is growing.

Traveling along Route 2, a maze of construction, designed to accommodate a projected 9,000 additional daily visitors to the area, is just one sign that something big is afoot as drivers approach Foxwoods Resort Casino in Mashantucket, Conn.

The other is a 30-story tower, rising from the surrounding reservation woodlands, and crowned with a symbol of Las Vegas – the shiny MGM Grand marquee with its signature lion.

„We’re on schedule and on budget, and that’s a good thing. Right now we’re running two shifts, seven days a week,“ said Gillian Murphy, senior vice president and general manager of the MGM Grand at Foxwoods, in mid-January.

When it opens in May, the USD 700 million MGM Grand at Foxwoods will be Connecticut’s third largest casino. Foxwoods Resort Casino, owned and operated by the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, was Connecticut’s first casino.

The neighboring rival Mohegan Sun Casino, run by the Mohegan Tribe, is undergoing its own USD 740 million expansion, which will add a 1,000-room hotel, House of Blues club and 64,000-square-foot casino by 2010.

The gaming industry has traditionally been one where „competition is very important,“ according to David G. Schwartz, director of the Center for Gaming Research at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

„Just look at the Vegas strip. We’ve got volcanoes and Paris Hilton having parties at night clubs and top chefs from around

the world – all because of competition,” Schwartz said.

„And I think you are seeing that trend nationally,” added Schwartz about Connecticut, where „when you get one casino in the market who upgrades, the other has to follow suit.”

Foxwoods officials prefer not to use the word expansion, instead calling the MGM Grand a „destination“ for New Englanders who want more than slots and gaming tables.

The MGM Grand will be connected to Foxwoods Resort Casino by a pedestrian concourse featuring a moving walkway, dropping visitors into the conference center at the MGM where they can take an escalator directly onto the casino floor. The business deal between the two casinos involves the MGM Grand licensing its name to the Mashantuckets as operators of the property.

Murphy, a former vice president for Harrah’s in Las Vegas, said the MGM-Foxwoods collaboration is „bringing a bit of Las Vegas to Connecticut.”

„There was a shift a number of years ago in Las Vegas from just a site for gaming to a destination spot for shopping, theater, night clubs ... and in many ways that is what we are bringing to Connecticut,” she said.

Before announcing the expansion in February 2005, the tribe carefully planned out its strategy, talking with various consultants for a period of several years to help envision the right size and mix of amenities for the new casino, said Saverio Mancini, director of public relations at Foxwoods.

According to Mancini, the tribe „always wanted to brand their property,” and eventually approached the MGM Grand which didn’t have a presence in this part of the country.

For MGM, the opportunity to form a strategic relationship with the Mashantucket tribe was „obviously mutually beneficial and therefore attractive to us,” according to Gordon M. Absher,

vice president of public affairs at the MGM Mirage in Las Vegas.

„Foxwoods is undeniably one of strongest forces in the gaming industry on the East Coast and has risen beyond the arena of tribal gaming to one of most successful casinos in the world,“ Absher said.

Adjusting her hard hat on a recent tour of the site, Murphy stood on the stage of the performing arts theater that she called the „signature piece of the property.“

„It’s really going to be something quite luxurious and different for the region. Think Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles,“ Murphy said of the theater whose décor will include rich burgundy and brown appointments.

„This is a larger venue for us and gives us more flexibility in term of bringing more Las Vegas-style, theatrical entertainment like Cirque du Soleil to the area. We plan on having a major headliner here almost every weekend,“ she added.

Foxwoods has also announced three well-known dining establishments will open at the MGM Grand – Boston chef Michael Schlow’s Alta Strada Italian restaurant, Junior’s Cheesecake of New York and chef Tom Colicchio’s Craftsteak.

Reatilers at the MGM Grand will include an Apple Reseller store, Bally featuring men’s and women’s shoes and leather goods, Dunhill men’s apparel and Gretta Luxe women’s boutique.

The MGM Grand will feature a nightclub called Shrine, located off the casino floor.

„I don’t think there’s anything quite like it to be seen in this area. It’s comparable to the famed Tao nightclub in Vegas,“ Murphy said about its two large dance floors, cozy seating areas, and an iced down vodka bar. A second floor in

the club will house an Asian bistro.

Among all the glitz and glamour of the resort's design, Murphy noted what is special about the building is they have managed to leverage the beauty of the natural surroundings through its exterior wall of windows.

For the warmer summer months, a fan-shaped outdoor swimming pool will cool off visitors who can also step into two whirlpools-hot tubs.

„There will be eight cabanas with everything from flat screen televisions to mini-bars and safety deposit boxes,“ Murphy said.

But the MGM Grand isn't all that's new in Mashantucket. To complement the MGM Grand, the tribe will embark on a USD 55 renovation project they are calling „the next generation of Foxwoods.“

The original Foxwoods Resort Casino features more than 7,200 slots, 380 table games and the only World Poker Tour room in New England. There are 1,416 guest rooms and suites in three hotels, more than 30 restaurants, a luxurious spa, more than 50,000 square feet of premium meeting and event space, 24 retail shops and five entertainment venues, including the 1,400-seat Fox Theatre.

Set to be unveiled by summer, the renovation will bring two new dining experiences by David Burke, acclaimed celebrity chef best know for his New York City restaurant, as well as a new luxury retail corridor and 6,600-square-foot, ultra-hip lounge.

The renovation at Foxwoods will also see the opening of four luxury boutique shops in the Foxwoods-MGM Grand portal, including Chopard, Judith Ripka and Rolex.

Although Foxwoods does not release its financials, a news

release posted on its Web site in September noted that in August the casino reported to the Connecticut Division of Special Revenue a net slot win of USD 71.9 million, a USD 687,000 increase from August 2006. The tribal nation also reported a USD 17.9 million contribution to Connecticut for August, increasing to USD 2.531 billion given since January 1993 when slot machines were introduced at Foxwoods.