

Dealers Hold The Cards

David Witte drove all night to join hundreds of fellow casino dealers in Hartford. But he wasn't interested in Connecticut. His final goal was Florida.

The riverboat casino dealer from Indiana traveled 14 hours to the Connecticut Convention Center to interview for a job with the Seminole Hard Rock casinos Tuesday morning.

„Seven hundred ninety-three miles, to be exact,“ Witte, 41, said between drags on a cigarette.

The Seminole Tribe has come north this week, meeting with casino dealers Tuesday and again today at the convention center. Most of the card-handlers there Tuesday were dealers from Foxwoods Resort Casino and Mohegan Sun, greeting each other as they waited for their turn at the interview tables.

Once a novelty profession, casino dealing is becoming a recognized career as gambling grows throughout the country. As the Seminole job fair shows, there's a growing demand for dealers – and wide interest in the job brings out many applicants.

The Seminoles want 3,650 experienced dealers for their Florida casinos, not novices with potential, as Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun often hire. And not just any experience: Applicants had to have at least two years of floor work and proven skills in specific games, including pai gow, popular with Asian bettors, said Dawn Neils, corporate representative for Seminole Hard Rock.

Preparing to launch the first table games in Florida later this year, the Seminole Tribe – which bought the whole Hard Rock chain last year – picked Connecticut as fertile ground. There are 4,700 dealers at Foxwoods Resort Casino and Mohegan Sun.

On Tuesday, a meeting room at the convention center operated like a human resources triage center. Black curtains created makeshift offices for Hard Rock managers to interview candidates. Those who drew interest progressed from cloth room to cloth room and ended with fingerprinting. Employees were recommend for hire pending background checks and other final steps.

Dealers compared notes on how far they progressed. One husband and wife, who both work at Mohegan Sun, said they were already planning to move after they received positive recommendations. They added that they like their present employer, but not Connecticut weather.

Others, who deal plenty of games but not all of the ones the Seminoles were looking for, had no such luck.

Besides Connecticut, the Seminole Hard Rock casinos are holding job fairs in Mississippi, Atlantic City and, possibly, Las Vegas.

Witte, a dealer at the Argosy Casino riverboat outside of Cincinnati, was interviewing for the same reason as many of the Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun dealers: the chance for higher pay, a new adventure, maybe a lower cost of living – and clearly better weather.

The Hartford day was gray as rain trickled down the convention center windows.

„There is not much we can do about 70 degrees and sunny in January,“ said Mitchell Etes, president and chief executive officer of Mohegan Sun.

Etes said he understands the recruitment game and isn't upset that the Seminoles are doing what Mohegan Sun and Foxwoods have done in Atlantic City, Puerto Rico and elsewhere.

„If you're opening a helicopter factory in Florida, you might

have done the same thing," Etess said, referring to another well-known Connecticut employer, Stratford-based Sikorsky Aircraft Corp.

His casino hasn't had a hard time keeping the roughly 2,000 dealers it needs, and he isn't worried about finding 250 more for an expansion set to open later this year.

At nearby Foxwoods, casino officials said it is finding plenty of interest in the more than 300 new full-time and part-time dealer positions it needs for the new MGM Grand casino opening in May.

The Seminoles and the Connecticut casinos declined to discuss how much money dealers make, but a letter circulated last fall by Foxwoods during its campaign to defeat a dealers' union said the average pay range is between USD 40,000 and USD 50,000 annually. That pay depends heavily on tips.

„Depending on where you are, the position can be a very nicely tipped [one],“ said Beth Deighan, president of New Jersey-based Casino Careers, a jobs website and executive search firm.

Connecticut's casinos, also owned and operated by Indian tribes, tend to train most of their own dealers. They hire some experienced dealers, but most come from in-house dealer schools. Foxwoods is currently running an 11-week part-time program for new dealers it has selected.

Tribal gaming employment has grown by 17 percent in the past three years to 327,000 employees in 2006, said Alan Meister, an economist with Analysis Group, which conducts an annual study of Indian gaming. Non-tribal casinos have slightly more employees, and but are growing more slowly, an industry group said.

Casino officials said dealing can be an attractive career choice because of the pay, the chance to work around the world

and the nature of the work. But it involves standing for extended periods, a certain amount of dexterity and often requires paying dues as a part-time dealer before going full-time with benefits.

For Witte, the ride back home may feel longer. He had recent experience dealing only one of the games the casino wanted: blackjack. The Hard Rock wanted experience in baccarat or pai gow as well.

On the way out, Witte said he had learned pai gow and planned to take a refresher course to continue his bid for a Florida job.

„I'm a patient person," he said.