

Stoney Nakoda casino a new start for reserve

Assisted by two showgirls, the chiefs of the Stoney Nakoda First Nation cut a red ribbon Tuesday to open Alberta's newest casino, hoping it will bring economic and social benefits to a reserve with 80 per cent unemployment.

„This is a very good day for the Stoney Nakoda Nation and all of its members. This opening marks the start of an important journey toward economic self-reliance,“ said Clifford Poucette, chief of the Wesley First Nation, which shares the reserve with two other native groups, the Chiniki and Bears paw.

The USD 65-million resort casino is at the junction of the Trans-Canada and Highway 40, at the turnoff to Kananaskis Country. The chiefs say it will provide employment, housing and social programs to the 4,000 Stoneys who live on the reserve, 55 kilometres west of Calgary, and at two satellite reserves near Longview and Nordegg.

With oil and gas reserves that are drying up, members say they faced a bleak future without some form of economic diversification.

The casino is the first phase of a number of related projects that include a 111-room hotel to open in December, an RV campground that will partially open this summer, and a truck stop and outlet mall.

The casino faced opposition from some tribal members and struggled with construction delays due to staffing and weather.

But the biggest hurdle, one chief bluntly said Tuesday, will be instilling a work ethic in some band members who have never

known any kind of real opportunity.

„You’ve got to work to earn a living, there’s no doubt about that, and it goes for our membership, too. They have to work to earn a living and move forward in their lives. We have to make sure they are aware of that.

„If we don’t start today, we’re not going to move ahead too quickly on some of these other developments without our own people working,“ said Bearspaw Chief Darcy Dixon.

About half of the resort’s 300 staff are Stoneys, which is higher than expected, said Arnold Bish, the reserve’s economic development officer. The casino still needs to fill about 20 per cent of its positions.

While other native casinos have struggled to retain staff from reserve membership, the Stoney Nakoda are confident that a hiring and training program operating for the past six months will improve on that record.

„We have to make clear to them from Day 1 what the expectations are. We have to prepare them mentally,“ said Su Hin Chee, the reserve’s chief financial officer. „Some of these people have never had a job in their lives.“

At Tuesday’s opening ceremony, Bruce Labelle, the Chiniki chief, had a message to Stoney Nakoda First Nations members.

„I ask you, fellow members, to be welcoming of our tourism friends. It is the generations that follow that are looking to us for opportunity,“ Labelle said.

Initial opposition to the casino from within the tribe came from three sisters who staged protests at the site.

Those issues have been resolved, said Dixon.

Last week, elders held a sacred pipe ceremony to bless the site.

„We are open for business. We are open to host you on our traditional lands,“ Dixon told an opening ceremony.

One of the casino’s first customers was Mike McGruther, a 46-year-old oilfield worker who drove from Strathmore to try his luck at the 300 slot machines and 15 gaming tables.

„I’m already up 12 quarters,“ he said minutes after the doors opened.

A smoke-free dining room will be offered to non-smoking guests, but smoking will be allowed in the casino itself under exemptions from provincewide smoking bans that are offered to native casinos.

That’s already drawing the ire of some non-smokers, like Stuart Smith, a local engineer.

„The smoking bylaws were created under the premise that everyone’s safety supercedes any individual’s right of personal choice to conduct addictive and self-destructive behavior such as smoking,“ he said in an e-mail.

Dixon said the reserve has gambling addictions programs in place to assist any of its members.

„I’ll be honest. Our people drive to Calgary or wherever there is a casino or race track or VLT. With a program here to educate our people on gaming, I hope that helps our people understand the effects.“

Dixon said the casino opening is an important milestone for the three Stoney Nakoda tribes.

„It’s the first time we have moved forward together and built some success with the resources we have. It’s been a difficult role getting all the key clans to come together to try to support what we have here.“

An invitation-only grand opening is scheduled for June 20 with

music by the band Prairie Oyster, which will play the at the resort June 19 to 21.