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Tribal hotel shows trend to diversify

C.R. ROBERTS; The News Tribune

No longer will hunch-monkeys and luck-pressers need to drive all the way west to Ocean Shores for an overnight stay and a flutter at the slot machines.

On a forested slice of Mason County between Olympia and Shelton, a new hotel will open Friday.

While the Puyallup Tribe delays construction of a hotel and conference center adjacent to its new Tacoma casino - and as a handful of other Washington tribes consider building hotels - members of the Squaxin Island Tribe are about to open theirs, attached to their Little Creek Casino.

Look for:

- Ninety-two rooms, including deluxe suites.
- A conference center suited for up to 500 people.
- A new restaurant and lounge.
- A pool and spa.
- An exercise room.
- A video game arcade.

"We felt there was such a need," said Sam Askew, director of hotel operations. "We felt there was a demand. There isn't a convention center in the immediate South Sound."

Askew and other hotel officials expect gaming customers will offer the biggest percentage of business, followed by people who attend conferences.

"There is definitely a need for convention space in the state capital," said Doug Boon, general manager. "Meeting space is at a premium."

The facility is located only 15 minutes from downtown Olympia.



LUI KIT WONG | THE NEWS TRIBUNE

The Squaxin Island Tribe's new Little Creek Casino Hotel near Shelton off Highway 101 will feature amenities such as a swimming pool and spa. The hotel is located about 15 minutes from downtown Olympia and opens Friday. The tribe hopes it will open the door to other types of development, such as retail.

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Askew and Boon said they also expect to capture traffic - whether for meetings or social gatherings - that follows the Legislature.

"Other spaces seem to be booked solid," Boon said.

He said the hotel is building marketing relationships with tourist and convention bureaus representing Thurston and Mason counties, and the state.

Financing for the \$19 million project came from gaming revenue as well as through Bank of America.

Alongside gaming, the tribe also manages Harstine Oyster Co., Kamilche Trading Post and Skookum Creek Tobacco Co.

The hotel project is part of a move to diversify economic development beyond gaming and tobacco enterprises.

Said tribal member and assistant general manager Michael Peters, "I think it's important to recognize that most tribes, as they look at building hotels, are looking for ways to develop economically. This is another way to grow the economic base."

The Quinault Indian Nation operates a hotel and casino at Ocean Shores. The Upper Skagit Tribe operates The Skagit casino and hotel near Bellingham.

According to Boon, five other tribes - Puyallup, Muckelshoot, Tulalip, Lummi and Jamestown S'Klallam - have recently considered building hotels adjacent to their casinos.

These and other Washington bands have also considered developing retail centers on tribal land, he said.

"We're considering other development right now," he said. "We want to broaden the tribe's economic base."

Infrastructure that may help lure businesses to a future Squaxin development include a railroad spur, a gas line, Bonneville power and freeway access.

Island Enterprises, one arm of the tribe's development plan, has recently been formed, Boon said. The group has begun meeting with Mason County and Shelton officials.

Gaming revenue helped soften the downfall of fishing, Peters said, and now, as the gaming market becomes saturated, the tribe hopes to find new opportunities.

Of that saturation, Boon said, "I think we're coming close to that point now. We are competing. Gaming initially was meant to create economic self-sufficiency."

Tribal members act as shareholders and receive a small - \$400 to \$500 - annual share. Priorities for tribal spending, Peters said, are education, law enforcement, fire, seniors and youth.

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Little Creek Casino Hotel

What: A new hotel and conference center attached to Squaxin Island Tribe's Little Creek Casino

Where: West 91 Highway 108, between Olympia and Shelton just off Highway 101

Opens: "Soft" opening begins Friday; official grand opening in late February

Cost: \$19 million

Land: Approximately 16 acres; reservation also includes more than 300 acres nearby

Rooms: 92, including deluxe suites, spa rooms and handicapped-accessible rooms

Price: \$89 to \$189, with various grades of complimentary accommodations for high-rolling casino guests

Amenities: High-speed Internet connections, new restaurant and lounge, business center, indoor pool and spa, gym, video arcade

Highlight: 1,800 objects of Native American art throughout, including pieces by 10-year-old Trelace Sigo

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