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Seminole Casino Rocking, Rolling

TRIBE PLACES A BIG WAGER ON GLITZ, BRAND NAME

By TED JACKOVICS

tjackovics@tampatrib.com

TAMPA -- The hotel rooms and multibedroom suites can be had for up to $1,600 a night and guests will be able to enjoy widescreen TVs or a soak in a big tub. Or, if they prefer, they can amble down to the casino for some electronic gaming or a look at rock 'n' roll memorabilia adorning walls from the hotel lobby to the casino.

It's all part of the glitz of Tampa's newest tourist attraction, the $100 million Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, which opens today just east of the city off Interstate 4 and Orient Road.

Operators of the 37-acre complex hope the pizazz of the Hard Rock brand and the casino-style gaming the Seminole Tribe offers will draw big crowds -- and dollars.

Representatives of the Seminole Tribe, which operates the complex and holds the gaming license, expect the 250-room hotel and casino to generate $300 million annually in revenue.

They also estimate the casino and hotel will pump $40 million into the Tampa area economy from expenditures such as goods and services. More than 2,000 jobs have been created. Tribe officials wouldn't reveal total employment wage figures for the hotel and casino but said that will be another boost to the Tampa economy.

The tribe signed an agreement to license the rights to use the Hard Rock brand and hopes it draw guests and gamblers.

"Hard Rock is one of the most recognized brands in the world," said James F. Allen, chief executive officer of gaming operations for the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

The Seminole Tribe hired seasoned casino executives such as Allen, who has worked for the Trump Organization, Hilton Hotels and is a former member of the New Jersey Casino Control Commissions Task Force on Gaming Regulation, to ensure the venue is a success.

Allen also oversees four other casinos and a similar, larger hotel-casino complex scheduled to open next month in Hollywood, Fla.

Vistors to the Tampa venue will find dozens of music industry memorabilia items, such as a cape signed by Grace Slick, lead singer of Jefferson Airplane, and folk singer Arlo Guthrie. They received the cape for performing at Woodstock in 1969. There's also a vest Jimi Hendrix traded to a member of the women's soul group the Shirelles for a guitar. Visitors also will see a guitar made in 1995 for hard rocker Sammy Hagar.

"We look for stuff that is eye-catching, historic and easily recognizable," said Don Bernstine, Hard Rock's memorabilia acquisition manager.

Hard Rock's alliance with the Seminoles on the hotel and casino and the similar one opening in South Florida reflects a new direction for the company, executives said.

"Our emphasis for expansion definitely is branching out of the brand into new business areas, particularly into hotels with casinos as an ancillary to that," said Hard Rock Cafe International Chairman Phil Clement.

For Loretta Briggs of Tampa, a first-time visitor to the Hard Rock Casino who was trying her hand on the electronic bingo machines Wednesday, the complex made the kind of impression Clement and Allen are hoping for the complex.

"It looks real good," Briggs said. "For sure I will be back."

(CHART) BY THE NUMBERS

10: The number of Flying Elvis skydivers dressed to look like Elvis Presley. They'll drop in on the parking lot of the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino about noon today for the grand opening. The public is invited. The hotel will uphold the tradition of smashing a guitar at the opening of Hard Rock properties.

24: The hours each day guests can play poker, bingo and more than 1,800 slot machines at the casino, which partially opened in June. The entire casino has been open since last month. Guests also can get food at a hotel restaurant 24 hours a day.

250: Rooms and suites in the 12-story hotel, which cost from $125 to $1,600 for a three-bedroom spread. All have stereo and CD systems and high-speed Internet access. You can get away from it all with a day at the "beach." There's a 4-acre pool area with a waterfall, fountains, cabanas and sports such as beach volleyball.

10,000: The amount of square feet of meeting space, including a grand ballroom than can be divided into eight sections. The meeting room walls are decorated with rock 'n' roll memorabilia.

Reporter Ted Jackovics can be reached at (813) 259-7817.

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Abstract (Document Summary)
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Is his job cool, or what? Don Bernstine acquires Hard Rock's signature rock 'n' roll memorabilia. "We look for stuff that is eye-catching, historic and easily recognizable," he said.; ; Tribune photos by PHIL SHEFFIELD ; The Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, which officially opens today, offers gambling and 250 rooms. The complex is expected to generate $300 million in revenue annually.; ; James Allen ; Veteran executive has worked for the Trump Organization, Hilton Hotels and as a New Jersey gaming regulator.; ; WFLA-TV photo by PETER MASA ; Hard Rock's trademark guitar will greet guests as they arrive. The instrument is based on one used by Paul McCartney.; Photo: PHOTO 4

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