

Casino Windsor Changing Name

Windsor, Ontario (AP) – Goodbye Casino Windsor. Hello Caesars Windsor.

The gambling palace announced Friday that it will change its name in early 2008, upping the ante in its ongoing battle against three competing casinos across the river in Detroit.

The name switch will coincide with a number of other significant changes, including a new 22-story hotel and a 5,000-seat entertainment center that officials say will draw Las Vegas-style acts.

The changes are being funded by 400 million Canadian dollars (USD 345 million) from the Ontario government, which owns the casino and hopes the moves will help it draw more American patrons, who sometimes are inclined to stay home and gamble in the U.S.

Casino Windsor has been struggling of late, thanks in part to a recently enacted smoking ban and stiff competition from Detroit's gambling halls, which themselves are undergoing improvements and adding hotel space.

Harrah's Entertainment Inc., which owns the Caesars name as well as a 50 percent interest in the Windsor Casino Ltd. management company, will run the casino.

Tim Wilmott, chief operating officer of Harrah's, said Caesars was „the most recognized, respected casino brand“ in the industry.

„Caesars Windsor will live up to that proud tradition, combining first-class restaurants, shows and casino games with an extraordinary level of attentive service unequaled among any Detroit-area casinos,“ he said during a news conference at the casino.

Under the deal, Harrah's will continue to split profits 50-50 with Hilton Hotels Corp. as before, said Teresa Roncon, spokeswoman for the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corp. The Ontario government will continue to use net profits from the facility to fund services, she said.

Business at the casino has been on the downturn under the six-month-old smoking ban and other factors, including 18 months worth of construction on a rotunda and other amenities. Revenue figures from the April-September period dropped to 168 million Canadian dollars (USD 145 million) from 225 million Canadian dollars (USD 194 million) the year before, Roncon said.

By comparison, Detroit's three casinos posted revenues of about USD 1.2 billion in 2005 and recorded revenues totaling USD 1.18 billion through November of this year, according to the Michigan Gaming Control Board.

Casino Windsor officials in July announced they were laying off nearly 300 unionized workers and 32 salaried employees due to sagging revenues. In September, the casino began offering sports betting to lure back customers.

Frank Fantini, publisher of the Morning Gaming Report, a daily e-mail publication sent to institutional investors and casino executives, said the recent moves present an opportunity to market the facility as a regional destination resort, potentially drawing more Canadian gamblers. The facility currently draws about 4.5 million visitors each year, about 80 percent of whom cross the border from the U.S.

„I'm sure it'll be a positive," Fantini said. „Because any time you've got a company like Harrah's that's going to re-brand their property, they're going to do it in a very comprehensive way.

„It's going to be much more than changing its name. I think you'll find it will become much more a resort destination and

much more upscale.“

Roger Martin, a spokesman for Detroit's Greektown Casino, said Greektown has ranked as readers' favorite in newspaper polls every year since its 2000 opening.

„It is a position we intend to maintain,“ he said. „But we welcome all competitors to town.“

„With the new products we have coming online, we're ready to compete with anyone,“ said Jacci Woods, a spokeswoman for another of Detroit's three casinos: MotorCity Casino.

A message seeking comment was left with an MGM Grand Detroit Casino official.

Friday's announcement followed a ribbon-cutting to unveil the renovation of a 9,500 square-foot, two-level rotunda topped by a six-story skylight dome. Parts of the rotunda, which formerly housed a waterfall and palm trees, were to be opened to the public later Friday.

The rotunda is decorated in Caesars' Roman theme, with sculptures of angels blowing horns, carved archways and marble columns. A new bar opening on the rotunda's upper level boasts windows and an outdoor patio providing expansive views of the Detroit River and skyline.

Kevin Laforet, president and chief executive of the casino, said the conversion to the Caesars design elements already has been completed in one part of the gaming area, although no Caesar logos have yet been displayed.

It's the first casino venture outside the U.S. for Caesars, Wilmott said.

The transition to Caesars Windsor is expected to have created 1,000 construction jobs, 400 new casino jobs and add more than 400 hotel rooms once completed.