

Gambling boat back in town without casino

Freeport – Laying anchor in Freeport once again, the owners of the Texas Star Casino gambling boat are looking for a fresh start after being scuttled by controversy.

The Texas Star Casino gambling boat returned Monday from Burton Shipyard in Bridge City where it received USD 200,000 in repairs and refurbishment and an overhaul inspection by the U.S. Coast Guard, Texas Star Casino CEO Grant Poynor said.

But gamblers will not be able to board the boat for its cash-gaming cruises to international waters until Freeport City Council grants the owners a specific-use permit. The permit would override the current zoning of the casino's land as a manufacturing district, which prohibits the loading of ship passengers. The next opportunity to acquire the permit is in March.

Poynor said the company was forced into this situation by the poor reputation of past management.

"Most of us are strangers to the community, and we are finding ways to be involved," Poynor said. The past management "kind of damaged our ability to do that because our reputation was poor."

Poynor is reorganizing the casino's land-based club, newly branded C.J.'s Waterway Cantina and Amusements, to target Hispanic customers during the week and be a premier live music venue on the weekends, he said.

"We are maximizing the use of our assets, which had been under-used," Poynor said. "We're looking for any organization that needs to rent space."

He said he is marketing the club to the Hispanic community for rent during the week for quinceañeras, the birthday celebration for 15-year old girls. They are planning an exposition Nov. 10 for vendors involved in quinceañera celebrations, such as cake bakers, dress makers and photographers.

“It’s like a Sweet 16 party only the families typically spend anywhere from USD 3,000 to USD 25,000 on them,” said Texas Star Casino executive assistant Karla Phelps.

Meanwhile, the club’s game room filled with eight-liner gaming machines will continue, he said. Gamblers win credit toward prizes, which is legal under state law, instead of cash. But gambling for cash draws more crowds.

“I spent \$ 25 and won \$ 70 in this DVD player,” said Brent Fry, a worker temporarily in the area, as he left with his friend Paul Bartlett, who won a Zebco fishing rod and reel.

“We are rebuilding our relationships one at a time now,” Poynor said after offering the pair a reduced rate on their hotel room at the casino’s expense. “It makes it easier when someone wins.”

But overcoming their bad reputation is a daily chore, Poynor said.

“People sometimes come in to play the games and ask me with a wink, ‘You guys play for cash, right?’” he said. “I say, ‘Absolutely not.’ I’m keeping everything about this business above board and clean.”

Mayor Larry McDonald said he will vote for the specific-use permit in March. He also said he might be in favor of permanently rezoning the casino land to a waterfront district if the company proves it has changed its ways.

“They need to prove to me that they’ve cleaned house,”

McDonald said. "If they want to bring in more business to Freeport, I'm all for it, but it has to be on the level."

McDonald said he also might support a new vote on rezoning the land in order to have the area along the waterfront consistently zoned.

A previous attempt to rezone the land was rejected by council Aug. 9 on a 3-2 vote. The Freeport Planning Commission unanimously recommended the land be rezoned to a waterfront district, which would allow the loading of passengers.

Councilman John Smith III said he has not seen enough of the operations of the new management to decide whether he's ready to vote to let them resume the boat's operations.

"I'm reserving judgment on that until we see more of what we've got here," Smith said.

Poynor said the casino will be busy rebuilding its reputation and preparing for when the gambling boat can operate. He has bought electronic equipment that will allow him to track the wave heights out at sea to avoid six-hour trips through uncomfortably high waves.

"Looking at some of the gaming boats out of Galveston, that's one of the biggest reasons for the failure of this kind of operation apart from poor ship maintenance," he said. "I've got the wave heights color-coded and light blue is for glassy water and green is for when the waves are so high your face will turn green."

Texas Star Casino has been in court battles with contractors the owner has refused to pay.

Poynor said the contractor's bills were much higher than the initial estimates. In one case of the casino's lack of payment, a contractor temporarily seized the title on the boat before the case was settled.