

State happy with performance of Boot Hill Casino - Kansas City Star

Written by Administrator

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Joe Braley, of Dodge City, plays the slot machines at the Boot Hill Casino and Resort in Dodge City on its first day of business, Tuesday, December 15, 2009. The casino, managed by Butler National Corp. of Olathe, is the first state-owned casino to start operations. It opened with a \$48 million first-phase development that includes 584 slot machines, 12 table games, a restaurant, saloon, snack bar and gift shop.

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Dodge City Mayor Kent Smoll likes to tour the parking lot of the Boot Hill Casino and Resort on the western edge of his city every so often to check out the license plates.

"I'd say 60 percent of the people are coming from outside the county," Smoll said. "It's a lot higher number than I expected."

Boot Hill, which opened as the state's first gambling operation a year ago, draws customers from Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado and distant counties in Kansas, including Sedgwick and Reno, Smoll said.

Managed by Butler National Corp. of Olathe, the Western-themed resort has pleased its owner □ the state of Kansas □ in its first year of operation.

"I think things have gone very well," said Keith Kocher, gaming facilities director for the Kansas Lottery. "As with any new business, it has had some growing pains, but we've worked through those as the year's gone by."

The casino, which opened on Dec. 15 last year, had generated \$36.4 million in gaming revenue through November, according to the lottery.

Revenue consultant Will Cummings, of Cummings Associates, who has made revenue

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forecasts for the other state-owned casinos, including Sumner County's, had predicted Boot Hill would earn about \$40 million annually.

Gaming revenue consists of all money from the casino's gambling games after related prizes have been paid.

The state had received \$8 million of Boot Hill's revenue through last month. Dodge City and Ford County each had received \$545,854, while the state's problem gambling and addictions fund had received \$727,805.

The city plans to use its share on infrastructure costs, Smoll said. Boot Hill also paid more \$1 million in real estate taxes, he said.

Police have reported no problems with the casino, Smoll said.

Boot Hill opened last December with 584 slot machines and 12 gaming tables, a snack bar, a casual dining restaurant with service

for 150, a saloon and a general store.

In February, the city will open a \$50 million 137,000-square-foot events center adjacent to the casino. The city-owned center will have an ice rink, convention space, and arena with bowl seating for 4,200 .

"We're pretty excited about Dodge City being the entertainment center of southwest Kansas," Smoll said.

The casino's second phase, scheduled to be completed in December 2011, will double the

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gaming floor, add a hotel, a day spa, and two more restaurants and lounges.

Kocher said the main issue the casino faces is drawing employees from the limited labor pool in Dodge City.

"All casinos have quite a bit of turnover, and when you're in a small community like that, that does become problematic," Kocher said. "But they worked their way through that."

Part of the problem is that it takes a long time to get prospective employees through the background checks conducted by the Kansas Racing and Gaming Commission, Smoll said.

The small labor pool is an issue for other sectors of the economy in Dodge City, he said, including the beef industry.

"We have a lot of jobs available. I'm a CPA, and we can't get CPAs to move to Dodge," Smoll said.

The casino underwent a change in general managers during the year. Its first GM, Mike Tamburelli, left in April to work for the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma. He was replaced by Mark Kashuda, the casino's senior director of operations. Kocher said the transition has been smooth.

Boot Hill is the only one of four state-owned casinos created by a 2007 state law to be up and running.

The next one, a Penn National Gaming casino in Wyandotte County, is under construction and scheduled to open in the first half of 2012.

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Iowa-based Peninsula Gaming recently was selected to build and manage a casino near Mulvane in Sumner County. Its Kansas Star casino is expected to begin operating in an interim facility in February 2012, with the permanent casino scheduled to open in January 2013.

The state hasn't received any new applications for the fourth casino, which would be located in southeast Kansas. Penn National withdrew a bid in 2008 and the Lottery rejected another bid.

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