

Baltimore's 1st Casino Highlights National Trend

Written by Administrator

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At the Horseshoe Casino's grand opening, showgirls adorned in gold glitter, beaded loincloths, feather headdresses and fuchsia false eyelashes stood atop pedestals in the courtyard, while VIP patrons in high heels and higher hemlines downed glass after glass of champagne.

The glitz and glamour Tuesday suggested someplace flashy like Las Vegas or Atlantic City. But the scene beyond the aerial acrobat winding her way up and down a cloth ribbon suspended from a chandelier made of fake diamonds and wine bottles served as a reminder: You're in Baltimore, baby, it says so right there, in big gray block letters on a smokestack at the trash plant just past the entrance.

The Horseshoe, a Caesars Entertainment Corporation venture that cost roughly \$442 million to build, reflects a major nationwide shift in the industry: As tourist destinations like Atlantic City, New Jersey, plunge into decline, gambling moguls are eyeing rust belt cities like Philadelphia, Cleveland and now Baltimore, as casino locations.

"For a while the trend was to build casinos in destinations like Las Vegas, Biloxi, Atlantic City. Now, the trend has shifted to be more building casinos in urban areas like Cincinnati, Columbus, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and now, Baltimore," said David Schwartz, director of the Center for Gaming Research at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

"There's a growing embrace of gambling. Initially it was something people wanted to keep away from the urban core," he said. "Now, it's a part of American life and if you're going to have it, you should have it in a place where there are a lot of people."

As casinos spread, he said gambling monopolies traditional destinations are crumbling. The Showboat Casino and Hotel in Atlantic City, a Caesars property, is slated for closure this weekend. Another casino, Revel, is to close next week, and Trump Plaza will shutter Sept. 16. Thousands of workers in New Jersey are scrambling to find jobs. Some will, or already have, at Horseshoe.

Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake has touted the casino as a boon for the city and a boost to tourism, with 2,400 new employees — more than half from Baltimore.

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But Horseshoe is joining an already crowded Maryland casino market. Although Horseshoe is the first casino to open its doors in Baltimore, it's the last of five casinos initially approved to operate in Maryland.

Before visitors to the Baltimore casino exit the highway, they'll see a billboard advertising Maryland Live. And the competition isn't friendly: Maryland Live didn't hesitate to sue a former employee who allegedly stole a list of high-rolling gamblers and used it to recruit clients to Horseshoe, where she now works.

Maryland lawmakers voted to allow slot machine casinos in 2007, and voters approved a constitutional amendment the following year for five casinos. Lawmakers voted in 2012 to allow table games like blackjack and a sixth casino near the nation's capital, and voters passed the expansion in a statewide ballot question that year. The Horseshoe Casino is nestled between a freeway entrance and the Baltimore Orioles and Baltimore Ravens stadiums.

"This is an urban casino, meant to meld into the rest of the city," Gary Loveman, chairman, chief executive officer and president of Caesars Entertainment said Tuesday. He predicted it will spur development all the way to Ravens Stadium.

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