

Milwaukee casino, other businesses carry on despite pandemic

Written by Administrator

Sunday, 25 October 2020 01:05 -

MILWAUKEE — In mid-July, Rodney Ferguson, CEO and general manager of Potawatomi Hotel & Casino, was faced with the unenviable task of informing 1,600 employees that he didn't have work for them anymore.

"It was extremely difficult because it's a family here," Ferguson said. "It hits close to heart and close to home because many of them have been here since the opening."

The casino is the business hardest hit by the fallout from COVID-19 in the Menomonee River industrial valley. A few firms, such as Palermo's Pizza, have actually added employees, though others, such as the Harley-Davidson Museum, have struggled as well.

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The nonprofit news outlet Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service provided this article to The Associated Press through a collaboration with Institute for Nonprofit News.

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Potawatomi, a major employer and philanthropic supporter in the city, opened in the Menomonee Valley as a modest bingo operation in 1991. The casino has since expanded several times, adding a hotel tower in 2014 and a second tower in 2019. The casino and hotels were set to accommodate the throngs of visitors expected in town for the Democratic National Convention this summer.

But the pandemic ruined those plans, shutting the casino from March to June. Employees were kept on the payroll until furloughed workers were permanently laid off in July.

Since reopening June 8, capacity at the casino has scaled up from 400 visitors to its current limit of 3,000, Ferguson said.

Visitors no longer need reservations to visit the hotel or casino, though table and bingo games remain closed, and bars and restaurants offer only to-go service, he added. The casino currently employs roughly 1,000 workers.

A return to normal operations for the casino, said Ferguson, is largely dependent on a vaccine that still doesn't exist.

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"That's what the virus has done across the state, country and the world," he said, discussing the coronavirus's impact. "As the vaccine comes into place, we will try to hire as many people back as possible."

Until then, he said, the casino will continue to employ safety measures to keep employees and the public as safe as possible, including limiting capacity, regular cleaning of machines and other areas, Plexiglass dividers between slots and temperature checks.

On the western end of the Menomonee Valley, between Potawatomi and Miller Park, sits L & R USA Inc., a medical equipment and supply company based in Austria and Germany. The company has been able to maintain its 70-strong workforce and add 20 temporary employees since the pandemic began, said Lindsay Ryback, a senior product manager for the company.

Sales took a hit early in the pandemic, she said, but a government contract to produce 400,000 face masks helped the company supplement reduced sales of medical equipment.

Read more <https://www.startribune.com/milwaukee-casino-other-businesses-carry-on-despite-pandemic/572860171/>