

Spotlight on Economic Development

Since the passing of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, revenue generated by tribal gaming has funded the infrastructure, health, and education of tribes and greatly improved their quality of life. As the industry has grown over the past two decades, the programs it funds have become increasingly varied, including environmental strategies and economic diversification. We spoke with the following tribal leaders about the issues facing their tribes and the programs that gaming has helped them establish. Here is what they had to say...

Twen Barton, Chairwoman Sac & Fox Nation of Missouri in Kansas and Nebraska

Sac and Fox Casino in Powhattan, KS
www.sacandfoxcasino.com



Twen Barton

The Sac and Fox Casino is located in Northeast Kansas on U.S. Highway 75, approximately 45 miles north of Topeka, and first opened in February 1997. The casino was built in three phases. At the opening of phase I in 1997, the floor housed two hundred and eighty-two slot machines and seven table games. Phase II was an expansion which occurred in December 1997 and housed four hundred and eighty-two slot machines and

seventeen tables. In 2008, the casino was expanded again and the entire floor renovated with new technology. Today we have seven hundred seventy-seven ticket-in ticket-out slot machines, fifty-one of the most popular coin operated games, thirteen table games and a five table poker room. Also included in the phase III expansion was a beautiful and relaxing VIP lounge. Overall the casino gaming floor is approximately 30,000 sq. ft. The Sac and Fox Casino is a popular destination that not only offers slots and table games, but also a three hundred yard driving range, an area for campers to park and plug into electricity, and a magnificent buffet and deli dining area topped with a warm friendly atmosphere.

Gaming has of course been the integral part of tribal progression. Money received from gaming has allowed us to expand upon the programs that had been in place. We now have many additional programs including elder assistance, a youth school clothing allowance, a health cost reimbursement program, and increased education funding for students of all ages. We also have a catastrophic fund for those who may be impacted by some sort of natural disaster, and more. All this

may not have been possible without Indian gaming.

While Indian gaming has helped our tribe create wonderful programs for our members, it is not the key to financial stability. One of the most important issues facing the Sac and Fox Nation today is these tough economic times. Just as the economic downturn had negatively impacted all Americans, the impact on Indian Country has been even more devastating. Members who live both on and off the reservation are feeling the effects of the economy, unemployment, and health care issues. Now more than ever, tribal governments must look for creative ways to maintain business and help provide services and benefits to its members.

We are closely watching our budgets, reducing spending and waste, and going green to significantly decrease utility fees and of course reduce our carbon footprint. By decreasing our liabilities, we will be able to maintain and provide programs, which will benefit our membership, especially in these tough economic times. In addition, we hope to increase job opportunities for our people and continue to see that each member has the opportunity to expand their education and live a healthy lifestyle.

Environmental protection is important to the Sac and Fox people. We have an environmental department with several programs including water, air, brown fields, and recycling. We celebrate an annual Sac and Fox Earth Day and are seeking ways to ensure earth-friendly business practices and introduce green technology onto the reservation and in the schools.

The Sac and Fox have recently teamed with a non-profit organization named Green Vet. This group was originally founded to educate, train, and employ U.S. veterans in green technology, a growing industry. Since inception, Green Vet has graciously expanded their program to include Native Americans. Because most tribal nations are remote, grant funding may be obtained to house those who are working on our reservation while they complete their internships. This is a beautiful marriage of helping all Native Americans as well as all veterans who protect our freedom, to be educated, trained, and employed in a booming industry.

As for future endeavors, we are looking into the addition of a hotel at the Sac and Fox Casino. While being a service to casino guests, we hope to increase play by offering overnight

amenities to those who live afar. We also look forward to bringing green technology to the casino and building a hotel that will be eco-friendly. In addition, the Sac and Fox along with the Kickapoo Tribe in Kansas are enjoined in a business venture. We have 80 acres of prime real estate in a booming destination vacation area called Village West in Kansas City, Kansas. While the tribal nations had negotiated to build and operate a destination casino resort, the Kansas government decided to start their own gaming enterprises. We are currently seeking ways to develop the land, engage a business partner or perhaps sell the property.

Beasley Denson, Miko (Chief)
Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians
Pearl River Resort (Silver Star and Golden Moon Casinos) in Choctaw, MS
www.choctaw.org



Beasley Denson

The Silver Star Hotel and Casino opened on July 1st in 1994. Not only did it create near full employment for tribal members, but it did great things for the rest of East Central Mississippi as well. Since then it has undergone five expansions and become one of the largest casinos in the state.

As a tribe, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians has come a long way. Up until the early 1900s, our tribal

members made their living primarily by sharecropping. We were a very poor group with a poor quality of life and poor health conditions. Even into the 60s we still had very high unemployment. Then we began developing new enterprises like wiring harnesses and plastic molding. Our reservation was home to a greeting card manufacturing operation for a time. Then came the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act in 1988. There is no doubt IGRA was a great thing for the Mississippi Choctaw. Since then, thanks in large part to the revenues earned from gaming, we've been able to steadily increase the standard of living on our reservation every year.

The Silver Star has always done very well. Its 90,000 sq. ft. house nearly 3,000 slot machines as well as table games. There are over 500 rooms, more than 75 suites and a first class spa. But our gaming enterprises have not been without significant challenges. The current recession and economic downturn has been tough for gaming operations across the country. I used it as an opportunity to re-examine every element of our casino operations. The result was a reduction in expenses by nearly 25 percent while maintaining the highest levels of customer service. We are going to emerge

from this economy a better operation all around.

Our second casino, the Golden Moon, was built in 2004. While it provides needed hotel rooms and meeting facilities, the Golden Moon also has additional gaming space that currently oversupplies our marketplace. Given the current economic environment, we are continually investigating different options to best leverage both casino properties. Because our tribe depends so much on the revenue generated by our casinos, we are always aggressively seeking ways to maximize the performance of each property and are optimistic about 2010.

In addition to the casinos at Pearl River Resort, we have a water park, Geyser Falls, and Dancing Rabbit Golf Club. Dancing Rabbit consists of two of the southeast's most acclaimed golf courses. They were designed by Tom Fazio and PGA great Jerry Pate. Each golf course covers 7,000 yards when playing from the championship tees, and offers five different sets of tees to accommodate every level of play. They are very beautiful courses, a lot of fun to play and have won awards from *Golf Magazine*, *Golfweek* and *Golf Digest*.

We have always been committed to environmentally responsible economic development. Our Office of Environmental Protection (OEP) works closely with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The OEP currently has projects dealing with water quality, solid waste, wetlands, underground storage tanks and hazardous waste. It also provides environmental consultation, compliance and assessment services to other tribal entities. Lake Pushmataha and our composting program are good examples.

Lake Pushmataha was constructed by the tribe in 2001 to provide recreational activities for the community and to serve as a hub for future recreation and fitness-themed economic development efforts. Since its construction, the lake has flourished and has become a valuable natural resource. Special emphasis is placed on protecting its health. Our OEP has implemented a water-quality monitoring program that monitors water quality and can predict the effects future development may have. The program will allow us to develop lakeside properties confident that the pristine waters will be preserved.

Recognizing the need to reduce the amount of waste being sent to landfill, our tribe is finding ways to capture some of those waste products and turn them into useful materials. We are developing a program to combine biosolids from our wastewater treatment facilities with food waste from our tribal schools and enterprises to produce a composted end product that can be used in general landscaping and erosion control activities. We like to say we are "turning trash into cash" with this program.

We are always looking for new ways to generate revenue. Over the past 30 years the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians has created a widely diversified economy. We employ approximately 8,000 people in a wide variety of capacities and pride ourselves on being able to capitalize on opportunities

that leverage our own resources with those of our business partners.

The current recession has highlighted the fact that a diverse economy is necessary to maintain stability. Our tribe operates 14 separate businesses, only five of which are related to gaming or tourism. Some of the projects we are considering now are related to alternative energy, advanced manufacturing, financial services and real estate development. We also operate a very successful Small Business Development Center that helps tribal members start their own businesses.

Claudia Brundin, Chairperson
Blue Lake Rancheria of California
Blue Lake Casino & Hotel in Blue Lake, CA
www.bluelakerancheria-nsn.gov



Claudia Brundin

We opened the Blue Lake Casino in June of 2002, a little over seven years ago. Almost immediately we began reinvesting and expanding to meet favorable local and regional demand. In 2003, we placed another 400 slot machines on our floor. In 2004, we added an events center. In 2005-06 we expanded our lounge and live entertainment areas and built a combination fuel mart, deli and non-smoking slots facility. In 2007-

08 we expanded our player's club, and began work on our hotel. Today, we have over 750 slots, a boutique 102-room hotel, an ultra lounge, four dining venues, a thriving fuel and convenience store and, most important, a team of outstanding professionals - many have been with us from the beginning - who pride themselves on taking excellent care of our guests. This year we are prioritizing a variety of venue improvements, including exclusive electronic table games, new slot machines, new restaurant offerings and much more.

Retaining our sovereignty is the most important issue for our tribe. But I think sovereignty is still viewed with suspicion in some quarters. Sovereignty is not, emphatically not, protectionism against outside influences, but rather sovereignty is the ability to have effective, culturally based local government. Our governmental structure, including a tribal court, has the ability to get positive things done on behalf of our members and wider community, in partnership, especially with the U.S. federal government. And, according to the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, a culturally strong tribal government is by far the most important predictor of a tribe's economic success. We've certainly found that to be true for us. Our tribe's ability to manage its own programs has

resulted in dramatic benefits throughout the community - for tribal members and our neighbors. Examples include our regional transit system, funding for local schools and fire and safety services, loans to neighboring municipalities, infrastructure maintenance, recycling and healthy living initiatives and many others. A solid legal and regulatory framework that enables the tribe to function as a sovereign government is the key to our success.

The Blue Lake Rancheria is always looking for ways to lighten our environmental footprint. We 'green-engineered' our hotel to be as energy efficient as possible. What we found was astounding. From spray foam insulation to infrared sensors to on-demand water heaters, the environmental protection technology available today is both cost effective and exciting. As a result, Blue Lake Hotel is the first hotel to be energy modeled by PG&E, and is the first hotel in California to show a minimum 10% energy reduction and an estimated 16% reduction overall. And due to our conservation performance, Blue Lake Hotel is eligible for rebates and incentives, which significantly lower our operational costs over the long term.

Before it was common practice, the tribe looked for ways to build with energy efficiency. The original Blue Lake Casino lighting and insulation is Title 24 code energy compliant and all air-handling systems include economizers, which use outside air as the first stage of cooling before triggering air conditioning. Water-conserving plumbing fixtures and drought-resistant landscaping are used to reduce domestic water use and irrigation needs. The tribe's recycling program recycles over 70 tons of materials annually, and has been recognized as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's "Waste Wise Partner of the Year" and "Program Champion," national awards for outstanding recycling efforts.

Our tribal government's Environmental Protection Agency manages multiple projects in cooperation with the U.S. EPA and many other local, regional and national stakeholders. We have extensive air and water quality monitoring initiatives that provide the source data for informed and proactive environmental stewardship and decision making. And while these programs are a good start, there is still much we can do - large and small changes we can make to improve the environment.

The Blue Lake Rancheria is always considering new enterprises. We believe renewable energy presents some of the most exciting possibilities today. We also see a need for almost unprecedented natural resource management and restoration. Developing technology, products and/or services in renewable energy or natural resource management would likely be successful on many levels and help improve the condition of the planet, provide opportunities for tribal members and others to learn leading-edge skills, and build local enterprises that respect the carrying capacity of the local environment. In addition, we will continue to reinvest in our current enterprises to make sure they remain strong, so we can continue to provide thousands of living-wage jobs with benefits throughout Humboldt County and California. ♣