

# Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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Daniel Lewis of Auburn-based Rhino Staging helps test lighting equipment on stage in the new Snoqualmie Casino's Ballroom. "What we've tried to create there is a little touch of Las Vegas," said Leonard Bergman of the Vegas-based design firm Bergman, Walls & Associates, (Mike Kane / P-I)

## Snoqualmie tribe rolls the dice with its lavish \$375 million casino

*Last updated November 6, 2008 1:53 p.m. PT*

**By GENE STOUT**  
P-I POP MUSIC CRITIC

Snoqualmie Casino isn't visible from Interstate 90, and there is no sign on the freeway marking its location about 30 miles east of downtown Seattle.

But just off Exit 27 near the town of Snoqualmie, the new 170,000-square-foot mecca of gambling, dining and live music hovers over the valley like the mother ship of Northwest casinos.

**COMING UP**

Its imposing "great lodge" design, with two prow-like structures atop its massive roof, belies a glitzy interior that features an enormous gaming area filled with gleaming, state-of-the-art slot machines and eye-popping dining areas and lounges.

Surrounding the casino area are a cigar bar, a martini and wine bar, a high-end restaurant, an eclectic buffet, an East-Coast-style deli, a sushi and noodle bar, an "ultra lounge" nightclub and an 11,000-square-foot ballroom that opens Friday night with a concert by Jessica Simpson, who released a country-themed album, "Do You Know," in September.

"What we've tried to create there is a little touch of Las Vegas," said Leonard Bergman of Las Vegas design firm Bergman, Walls & Associates, which designed The Mirage, Treasure Island and other gaming resorts. The

general contractor is Skanska USA Building, which built Benaroya Hall and McCaw Hall. The interior designer is Yates-Silverman Inc., with 40 years of experience in designing hotel and casino interiors.

The 24/7 party palace opened at 10 p.m. Thursday following a red-carpet, celebrity-studded gala. The King County Sheriff's Office, anticipating that as many as 30,000 would show for the public opening, warned of gridlock between exits 25 and 27.

Despite the project's mind-boggling price tag of \$375 million -- for the land, construction, staffing and promotion -- tribal administrator Matt Mattson describes the tribe's mood as "ecstatic."

"The tribe views this as a tremendous opportunity," he said. "And economic opportunity means empowerment. It's a chance for the tribe to grab hold of its future and control its own destiny."

But with the recent real-estate meltdown and looming recession, Mattson admits there is nervousness among the more than 600 tribal members who live throughout the Snoqualmie Valley and in other western states.

"We're hearing things from some of the other tribes that their revenue is off or flat," he said. "People are spending more to fill up their gas tanks and they're seeing home values go down. And as a result, entertainment spending has been curtailed."

On a positive note, the casino occupies a prime, 57-acre site east of Seattle, where it can draw on affluent communities along the I-90 corridor, from Mercer Island to Snoqualmie Ridge.

"These are some of the wealthiest communities west of the Mississippi," Mattson said. "And everything that we read and studied in putting this project together indicated that you have to be able to appeal to the people who live within 25 miles."

A modest roadside casino -- instead of a lavish, multimillion-dollar facility -- would not have worked, he said.

"Given the socioeconomic status, the sophistication of the people who live there, we think that doing more and starting out with a high-level property instead of a roadside casino gives us a better opportunity to succeed. If we hadn't done that, our upside potential would have been seriously limited or diminished."

Mattson and the tribe he manages will likely know very soon whether their \$375 million gamble will pay off.

"We've been very conservative with our numbers and our projections and we're comfortable that we'll be able to service our debt and do quite well if we follow the statewide averages for casinos," he said.

"I guess on Thursday and Friday, we're going to begin to find out if we're dramatically wrong."

Snoqualmie Casino is the latest Titanic-size casino to open within a short driving distance from Seattle. Tacoma's Emerald Queen Casino & Hotel, 32 miles south of Seattle, has upcoming shows by Keith Sweat (Saturday) and Sinbad (Nov. 14-15). Tulalip Resort Casino, about 40 miles north of Seattle, features a roster of nostalgia and tribute bands, among The Retros (Friday), Shambala and Whiskey Creek (Saturday) and Magic Bus (Nov. 14). The Tulalip also operates a concert amphitheater in the summer.

Last week at Snoqualmie Casino, workers were busily training at gaming tables, testing slot machines and menus, and putting the finishing touches on The Ballroom and posh SNO lounge. The latter seats 890 patrons

## SNOQUALMIE CASINO

*WHAT:* Live music, dining and gambling

*WHEN:* Open 24/7

*WHERE:* Exit 27, Interstate 90 (east of Issaquah)

*TICKETS:* Prices vary for shows at The Ballroom and SNO lounge; purchase tickets at Ticketmaster or [snocasino.com](http://snocasino.com)

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in an elegant but intimate setting. Well-padded folding chairs, floor-to-ceiling drapes and a state-of-the-art sound and lighting system enhance the experience.

The lineups at The Ballroom and SNO are broadly eclectic, from Seattle rock band The Blakes to "Nashville hippie band" Jypsi. The Ballroom also may offer world-class boxing and national poker tournaments. At SNO, where the cocktail waitresses are dubbed "SNO angels," celebrity DJ Momjeans, aka Danny Masterson, will perform at the launch party at 11 p.m. next Friday (tickets are \$15 to \$40).

Following shows at SNO, DJs will play "genre relative" music depending on the style of the live act. SNO also will have "rockaroke" on Sunday nights.

SNO features stylish decor -- floating pallets on the ceiling, a mirrored back bar and walnut floors and stage -- and a massive balcony where patrons can enjoy a 180-degree view of the Snoqualmie Valley and Mount Si, with drinks in hand.

"With a new venue, you don't know what works and what doesn't," said Matt Gallagher, vice president of marketing at the casino.

"So we have a unique opportunity to try a lot of different things. We wanted to differentiate ourselves from the other properties in town. We're looking beyond the typical casino act. The Flying Karamazov Brothers, for example, is a very unusual casino act. When they went on sale, they did gangbusters. We're trying to fill that void, that niche on the Eastside that's hungry for entertainment."

Gallagher, who worked in casino-rich Tunica, Miss., south of Memphis, Tenn., before joining Snoqualmie Casino, books the two live-music spaces himself through national talent agents. He also has scouted music festivals in Memphis, Nashville, Tenn., and Austin, Texas, as well as trendy Las Vegas casinos, for ideas.

"We looked at what some of the casinos in Vegas were able to do, like the Hard Rock Cafe and the Palms Casino. They have a demographic that's pretty comparable to the Eastside," he said.

If the casino succeeds in maintaining a hip live-entertainment lineup, it will have come a long way from the late '90s and early 2000s, when Seattle musician Jim Basnight booked Crystal Gayle, Gordon Lightfoot, The Coasters, Peter Tork of the Monkees and other over-the-hill acts at Northwest casinos.

"Most casinos I was working with were gearing up for the mom-and-pop and grandma-grandpa crowd, mostly '50s and '60s acts and occasionally someone who was a hit in the '70s, but more in a country kind of realm," Basnight said.

What Snoqualmie Casino lacks are a hotel and convention center.

"I've noticed the general trend of these casinos is to create a destination, so that people can come a long way and stay for a while and spend money over a period of days," Basnight said.

"'Creating a destination' was the buzz phrase that I was hearing in a lot of marketing meetings in the first half of this decade. And now most casinos up and down the interstates have hotels."

Snoqualmie Casino makes up for its lack of hotel rooms with a host of sumptuous amenities right in Seattle's backyard -- among them a plush cigar bar with walk-in humidior, called LIT, and a luxurious, 88-seat, high-end restaurant, called Terra Vista. And there's a six-level parking garage for rainy Northwest days.

"What we've angled for is the attention to detail," said Gallagher, the vice-president of marketing. "It's not about quantity, it's about quality."

The 51,000-square-foot gaming floor features 50 table games, eight poker tables and 1,700 slot machines mounted on distinctive platforms, or "slot bases," with the casino's crescent moon logo (tribal members call themselves "people of the moon"). Plasma screens provide indoor signage throughout the building.

Snoqualmie Casino has made all restaurants on the north side of the casino smoke-free. And the casino has installed a ventilation system that can exchange all of the air in the building every 15 minutes, providing a less smoky environment than many casinos.

The most striking visual feature in the main casino area are the massive crossbeams that appear to be solid wood, but actually are steel trusses covered in wallboard and wood-grained wall covering -- a non-combustible design.

The lack of highway signage will strike many visitors as curious. But Mattson, the tribal administrator, explained that the casino made a concession to the local community and the Mountains-to-Sound Greenway Trust that there would not be a neon sign or any other large signs on the highway.

"And we're standing by that commitment," he said.

For Mattson, the casino's opening comes almost as a relief after years of planning and setbacks.

"I've been talking about this project for eight years," he said, "and it's been a virtual casino for so long that it's almost anti-climactic that this thing is opening."

"The tribe and I have talked about this being a high-class place, and there's a real concerted effort to keep that promise and to offer more sophisticated food and entertainment, as opposed to just aging rock stars."

## ENTERTAINMENT LINEUP

Here's what's coming up at the Snoqualmie Casino:

**THE BALLROOM:** After Jessica Simpson, it's Wynonna Judd, Nov. 26 (\$55-\$95); Sergio Mendes, Nov. 28 (\$40-\$80); The Blakes, Dec. 27 (\$10); Hiroshima, Dec. 29 (\$20-\$40); and Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, Dec. 30 (\$25-\$45). And there's a New Year's extravaganza on Dec. 31 (\$175). The new year brings: Darryl Worley, Heidi Newfield and Jason Michael Carroll, Jan. 3 (\$20-\$40); Terry Fator, Jan. 15 (\$45-\$95), Wilson Phillips, Jan. 16 (\$45-\$95), En Vogue, Jan. 17 (\$30-\$50), Chinese Acrobats of Hebei, Jan. 25 (\$20-\$55), The Flying Karamazov Brothers, Jan. 29 (\$10-\$25), and LeAnn Rimes, Jan. 30 (\$50-\$100).

**SNO LOUNGE:** The roster of entertainers at SNO lounge opens with Deanna Carter (Tuesday), followed by Ingram Hill (Wednesday and Thursday; free), Chuck Wicks, Nov. 18, Kyle Cease, Nov. 19-20, Jypsi, Nov. 25-26 (free), Gloriana, Dec. 2 (free), Cary Brothers, Dec. 3-4, Keith Anderson, Dec. 9, Henry Cho, Dec. 10-11, Kate and Kacey Coppola, Dec. 16 (free), Natasha Leggero, Dec. 17-18 (free) and Trent Tomlinson, Dec. 30. Tickets for SNO lounge shows that aren't free are \$10-\$25.

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