

Chukchansi casino closure puts planned events, interrupted gamblers in limbo

By Andrea Castillo



Hotel security, left, informs newly arrived guest Friedrich Schaefer, right, who was traveling from Germany, that Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino is closed Friday, Oct. 10, 2014 near Coarsegold, Calif.

ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

For Hoover High School's Class of 1994, the sudden closure of Chukchansi Gold Resort and Casino is personal.

A planning committee scheduled their 20th reunion celebration to take place Saturday at the Coarsegold casino and hotel. But its temporary closure by state and federal officials has left them and others who have hotel reservations, event plans or unclaimed gambling money, with unanswered questions. The Hoover committee is scrambling to figure out an alternative.

Two factions of the Picayune Rancheria of Chukchansi Indians have battled for years. Their differences came to a head Friday when the National Indian Gaming Commission and state attorney general each ordered the tribe to close the casino and hotel after an armed infiltration of the casino Thursday night by the faction led by Tex McDonald. The faction had been relegated to a nearby tribal business center since the end of August, when a group led by Reggie Lewis forcibly took over the casino.

Stacey Olmos, one of the reunion committee members, said the group rounded up \$7,500 from the 167 Hoover graduates who committed to attending. They confirmed the attendance last week and paid in full using a debit card. Now they don't know how to get the money back.

Making matters worse, Olmos said repeated calls to Chukchansi have gone unanswered. She said some phone lines appear to have been disconnected.

“We can’t get an answer from anyone anywhere,” she said. “We’ve had issues as far as being able to book elsewhere because they have all the money.”

Olmos said classmates are flying in from all over the country and already paid to stay at Chukchansi.

“The question from classmates to us has been should we cancel our reservation?” she said “Well, there’s no one to call. There’s no way to cancel.”

Casino spokesman Roger Salazar said the general manager is working with state and federal authorities to determine whether he can get some parts of the operation going again. He said the hope is that by Tuesday, officials can set up a call line to address patrons’ questions and concerns.

“There’s nobody to take the calls right now,” he said. “It’s frustrating for us; it’s frustrating more so for our patrons, and we get that.”

Salazar previously said those with credit card reservation holds will not be charged if they do not stay at the casino. He did not address what could happen to those whose credit cards have already been charged.

“If they have to make other plans we understand that,” he said. “Clearly this is a mitigating circumstance. The casino management, I expect, will be as flexible as we hope people are being now with us.”

The federal order could be rescinded, but only when the tribe proves it can safely run the hotel and casino without problems.

On Friday afternoon a federal judge in Fresno granted a request by the state to shut down the casino and resort. The order is temporary and will be in effect until a preliminary injunction hearing at 1:30 p.m. Wednesday.

Thursday’s conflict arose from news last week that the National Indian Gaming Commission would close the casino if required audits and other financial documents were not provided to the agency by Oct. 27. The McDonald faction, in search of missing documents, squared off with security guards representing the Lewis/Ayala faction.

Both sides said they are eager to get the casino back up and running. Casino profits provide \$1 million monthly to fund the tribe.

Olmos and her fellow graduates have been planning their party for a year. They are doing everything possible to ensure it happens, she said, including filing a dispute with the bank in hopes the money will be credited back so they can fund a new reservation.

But Olmos worries that if Chukchansi reopens before Saturday, managers will hold the Hoover group to its contract even if they have secured another venue. She also worries that if it is open, the food won’t be ordered, the event hall won’t be clean and it won’t have proper staffing.

They initially chose Chukchansi because it was all-inclusive: Dinner, a club atmosphere, hotel, and the type of place where classmates could continue hanging out after the official reunion is over. But even if the hotel and casino reopens, Olmos said many of her classmates no longer feel it’s a safe venue.

Contact Andrea Castillo: acastillo@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6279 or [@andreamcastillo](https://twitter.com/andreamcastillo) on Twitter.

Copyright

© 2014 www.fresnobee.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.fresnobee.com>