

Chukchansi casino will reopen on Thursday, tribal officials say

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Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino near Coarsegold will reopen Thursday morning after a closure that lasted more than a year, tribal officials confirmed Monday.

The resort will reopen at 10 a.m. Thursday, in time for New Year's Eve celebrants. A formal grand opening is planned for Jan. 15.

Security video from Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino from Oct. 9, 2014, shows some of the confrontations that occurred when a rival tribal leadership faction entered the hotel-casino. The clash led state and federal government agencies to close Chukchansi Gold.

The decision setting a date to reopen followed a daylong meeting Monday of tribal council members in Fresno.

"Since our (October) election, the Tribal Council has worked every day with our government partners, casino management team and local business partners to get Chukchansi Gold Resort and Casino ready to open," Tribal Chairwoman Claudia Gonzales said Monday in a prepared statement. "We are thankful for the support of our members and believe this is an important first step in bringing prosperity back to our people."

There will be more than 1,700 slots and 22 table games when the casino opens. The reopening weekend will offer incentives to attract patrons, who can redeem all their winnings from before last year's closure, tribal officials said.

Initially, the casino will reopen with more than 56,000 square feet of gaming space. By mid-January, all seven restaurants will be open. The hotel will open initially with 220 rooms and suites. Another 200 will open later in 2016.

Among the games available are video poker and Keno and new machine games such as Britney Spears, Batman, Sons of Anarchy and Big Bang Theory. Besides blackjack, the table game selection will offer new table games like Mystery Card Roulette. Other games include Crazy 4 Poker, Pai Gow Poker, Ultimate Texas Hold'em, Spanish 21, Three Card Poker and Mini Baccarat.

Christian Goode, the resort's chief operating officer, said there will be more promotions and cash giveaways for patrons as well as changes in eating establishments.

But the emphasis, he said, will be on the best possible guest experience.

"We want to make sure people have a world-class experience," he said. "It's not about one restaurant or one slot machine, it's about entertainment and the entire experience."

In addition to redeeming points through gaming, the casino will open a Chukchansi retail store that will allow a different kind of points redemption for patrons.

The Deuces Diner, which had a 1950s theme, will change to a cocktail and freshly made pizza and taco restaurant, Goode said. There will also be a Firehouse Lounge featuring sporting events promotions, comedians and other live entertainment.

A greater effort also will be made to attract out-of-town tours and travelers, Goode said.

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Tribal Chairwoman Claudia Gonzales

In the summer, outdoor space also can be used for concerts and other events, he added.

Casino officials are in the process of hiring 1,000 employees, about the same number employed when the casino was closed.

The opening will allow the tribe to begin paying off its \$250 million in debt, a restructured financing plan approved three years ago after the tribe had fallen behind on its hotel and casino payments. The tribe must make two \$12 million payments each year and has been unable to pay since last September.

Bondholders also arranged for the tribe to get an additional \$35 million earlier this year to pay start-up costs to reopen the resort.

Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino was last open on Oct. 9, 2014, when a factional dispute led to a tribal police raid in a casino office, the pulling of a fire alarm and eventual evacuation of about 500 people from the casino and hotel. The tribal police action was approved by the faction that was led by Tex McDonald to find information on two years of missing audits.

The federal government had threatened to close the casino if the tribe failed to submit audits. The following day, the National Indian Gaming Commission and state Attorney General shuttered the casino because the safety of employees and patrons could not be assured. The tribal police raid led to 15 arrests.

Last week, the tribe was given the green light to open by the gaming commission and state officials. Two factions disagreed with the reopening, but a federal judge in Fresno said the tribe had lawfully reached agreements with Madera County, the state and federal government.

Gary Montana, who represents distributees, a faction in the tribe claiming that only 46 Chukchansi should be members of the tribe, said Monday he is considering legal options. None of the options would keep the casino from opening, he said.

Montana said he could file a new lawsuit in the District of Columbia disputing the federal government's decisions earlier this year and in 2014 to make the 2010 council the tribe's interim leadership until an election could be held. He also had issues with the October election, which included members suspended or sanctioned from the tribe and included voters who were "disenrolled."

Under terms of the agreement reached with the federal government, the tribe will have to pay the federal government \$500,000 within the next year and submit to supervision for its audits.

The remainder of the fine, about \$19.3 million, is suspended unless the tribe fails to live by its agreements with the federal government, including jeopardizing the safety of patrons and employees.

To prevent safety issues from occurring, the tribe entered a pact with Madera County to hire a full-time deputy with office space at the casino and pay for a firefighting vehicle that allows firefighters to reach the tallest parts of the 11-story hotel.

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