

Spokane Tribe Casino opens to much fanfare on Monday evening

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Hundreds of people braved a cold and foggy Monday evening for the public grand opening of the Spokane Tribe Casino in Airway Heights.

It was a moment some tribal leaders have waited more than a decade for.

"This is the heart of a prosperous future for the Spokane Tribe's people," Ed Clark, who was part of a consulting team that advanced the casino project, said in a speech before the ribbon-cutting, noting that the West Plains area is at the center of the tribe's ancestral land.

As a major employer and driver of revenue for tribal programs, the casino will lift the Spokane Tribe out of "crippling poverty," Clark said.

He made only a passing mention of continued opposition to the project. The Kalispel Tribe, which owns Northern Quest Resort and Casino in Airway Heights, says there aren't enough gamblers in the area to sustain two casinos, and Spokane County leaders are suing the federal government over concerns about the new casino's impact on Fairchild Air Force Base.

As music thumped through speakers into the frosty air Monday evening, there were shouts of excitement from the crowd of people waiting to test their luck in the new gambling venue.

Standing among the crowd, Ousman Doucoure, a drywall installer from Spokane, marveled at the row of cars that stretched from the parking lot into the newly built roundabout on U.S. Highway 2, which serves as an entrance to the casino.

"The line to get in here is crazy," Doucoure said.

Patty Lux, 70, of Spokane Valley, was eager to find some 5-cent keno machines at the Spokane Tribe Casino. She said she often drives about 40 minutes to the Coeur d'Alene Casino because she prefers it over Northern Quest.

"I'm glad to see Quest have some competition, finally," Lux said. "I like a smaller casino anyway."

Construction on the Spokane Tribe Casino began about a year ago after Gov. Jay Inslee gave final approval for the project.

The tribe has long-term plans to expand the development. A \$400 million master plan calls for a hotel, cultural center, entertainment venue and retail shops on the 145-acre site. The tribe says the built-out casino complex will support more than 5,000 jobs with an annual payroll of about \$66 million.

As people streamed inside Monday evening, David BrownEagle, the Spokane Tribe's vice chairman, strolled across the neon-lit casino floor and smiled.

"For me, it's humbling," BrownEagle said, tracing the tribe's struggles from the casino opposition back to its battles with Col. George Wright in 1858.

"All the people that came before this day, who had the heartache, who had the vision, who had the persistence ... and they just kept going and going, and winning, and winning," he said. "All the effort that went into this, that got us today."

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