DAILY SOUTHTOWN

South suburban casino opens to huge crowds, patrons ‘blown away’ by first look

Mike Nolan / Daily Southtown

People wait in line to enter the Wind Creek Chicago Southland casino on opening day, Nov. 11, 2024. (Mike Nolan/Daily Southtown)

By MIKE NOLAN | mnolan@southtownstar.com | Daily Southtown

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The opening culminates a more than two-decade goal of south suburban politicians, and patrons, who began getting in line more than a hour before the opening, saying they were eager to see it.

“I’ve been looking forward to this for a long time,” said Tony Barber, of Lansing. “I’m hoping I will win some money today.”

Angelique Harper, of Calumet City, said she drives by the site, southwest of Halsted Street and Interstates 80/94, each day on her way to work in Joliet.

“I’m off today and had to come by to try it,” she said. “I’m thinking maybe because it’s opening day the slots will be a little looser so people come back.”

For now, just the casino and some food offerings are open, and the casino will operate from 8 a.m. to 4 a.m. seven days a week, according to Donia Lewis, a spokeswoman for Wind Creek.

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Over the years, suburbs including Country Club Hills, Chicago Heights, Ford Heights and Dolton have floated proposals for casinos.

In the selection process that culimnated in the Wind Creek project being selected in December 2021 to proceed, proposals from Calumet City, Lynwood and Matteson were also considered by the Illinois Gaming Board.

A steady stream of traffic flowed from southbound Halsted into the property, and traffic was backed up not only on that street but, as a result, from exit ramps off the highway.

Brian and Carmelita Townsend, of South Holland, were among the visitors. Brian Townsend said they came “just to see how it was, for the brand new experience.”

His wife said they were impressed.

“Inside, it was absolutely beautiful,” Carmelita Townsend said. “I think they have something for everyone, as far as games.”

The couple said they visit Indiana casinos, such as Horseshoe in Hammond and Hard Rock in Gary.

Carmelita and Brian Townsend of South Holland outside Wind Creek Chicago Southland Casino on opening day, Nov. 11, 2024. (Mike Nolan / Daily Southtown)

“Right now this is No. 1,” Brian Townsend said.

Leaving the casino, Viola Bigelow said she was “blown away” by what she saw.

The Calumet Park resident said she tried her hand at a couple slot machines and didn’t have much luck, but was impressed with the casino.

People crowd the front doors of Wind Creek Chicago Southland casino on opening day, Nov. 11, 2024. (Mike Nolan / Daily Southtown)

Wind Creek is a subsidiary of PCI Gaming Authority Inc., which manages 10 casinos and other gambling properties on behalf of the Alabama-based Poarch Band of Creek Indians.

The Southland casino, at 17300 S. Halsted St., spans 75,000 square feet. A 16-story, 252-room hotel with a spa and a steakhouse on the top floor is scheduled to open early next year.

People wait to get in the Wind Creek Chicago Southland casino on opening day, Nov. 11, 2024. (Mike Nolan / Daily Southtown)

The casino opened at 11 a.m., but Bigelow was there more than an hour early, and as people walked up they began forming their own lines, with little security visible to direct them.

One line stretched to the north of the main doors, out to the surface parking lot, while another approached from the south, outside parking garages.

Some people grew impatient as doors would open, then close briefly. There was no pushing or shoving as people tried to make their way in, but some people asked why the line wasn't moving faster.

A security guard came out, hands in the air and asking people to be patient.

"I'm only one person so stand by, I'm trying to make it happen," he said.

At one point after the opening, an East Hazel Crest Fire Department ambulance was slowly driven from Halsted onto the property, contending with lines of vehicles waiting to get in.

The 11 a.m. opening on Veterans Day was intended to coincide with the signing of the armistice agreement, ending hostilities in World War 1 and taking effect on the 11th hour, of the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918.

"It was a very special date and time for us to open," Wind Creek's Lewis said.

Brian Townsend, a U.S. Army veteran who served from 1978 to 1985, was stationed in Louisiana and at some point deployed to Germany.

The Townsends said they expected large crowds, but said "they have to work some kinks out" in handling patrons.

Wind Creek Chicago Southland casino on opening day, Nov. 11, 2024. (Mike Nolan / Daily Southtown)

Legislative efforts in Springfield held out hope for at least since May 2011 of clearing the path for a south suburban casino.

The Homewood-East Hazel Crest site and Country Club Hills had been considered solid contenders for the state's 10th casino license, which ultimately went in 2008 to Des Plaines and resulted in the hugely successful Rivers Casino.

Wind Creek is projecting gross gaming revenues approaching $160 million a year by 2025.

As part of its license application, Wind Creek has promised to establish the Southland Public Benefit Fund.

Initially, Wind Creek plans to distribute $150,000 annually during the first five years of operation, with the money providing scholarships to disadvantaged students in the south suburbs and helping bolster access to health care.

Wind Creek said it intends to create a fund of $20 million after five years to boost yearly disbursements to $1 million.

The 2019 law that provided a license for a land-based casino in the south suburb provides for the host community and 42 other south suburbs to share in 5% of revenue generated by the casino.

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In this instance, with two host communities, they would each keep 2% of monthly adjusted gross receipts, while another 3% would be shared among 41 other south suburbs. The host communities also would get $1 of the $3 admission tax for each person entering the casino.

Taxes are levied on a casino's adjusted gross receipts, or revenue minus winnings paid to bettors. Hofeld said that 55% of the casino site is in East Hazel Crest and 45% is in Homewood, and that is how the two communities' shares of tax revenue would be divided, according to an agreement.

Wind Creek has estimated that $3 million in tax revenue would flow annually to Homewood and East Hazel Crest, and another $4 million a year to the other communities.

Those communities are Beecher, Blue Island, Burnham, Calumet City, Calumet Park, Chicago Heights, Country Club Hills, Crestwood, Crete, Dixmoor, Dolton, Flossmoor, Ford Heights, Glenwood, Harvey, Hazel Crest, Lansing, Lynwood, Markham, Matteson, Midlothian, Monee, Oak Forest, Olympia Fields, Orland Hills, Orland Park, Palos Heights, Park Forest, Phoenix, Posen, Richton Park, Riverdale, Robbins, Sauk Village, South Chicago Heights, South Holland, Steger, Thornton, Tinley Park, University Park and Worth, according to the state.

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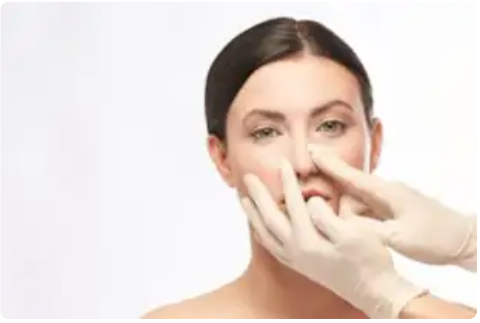

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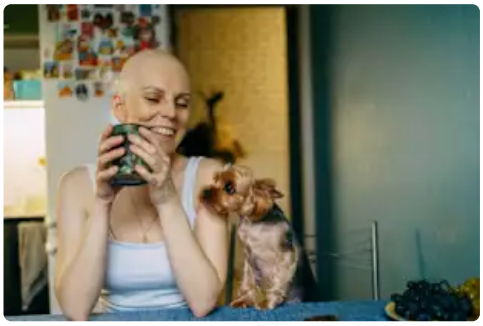

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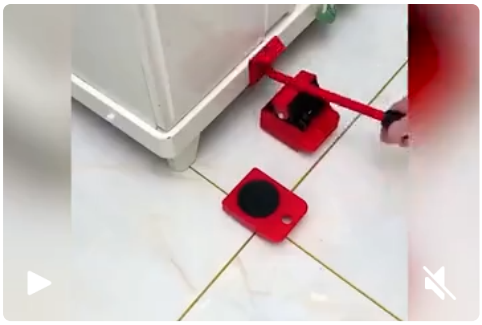

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