$180 million renovation marks 25 years of successful Harrah's partnership with Ak-Chin tribe

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When the small Ak-Chin Indian Community decided to enter the casino business in the early 1990s, it was a gamble for the tribe.

"In the beginning, some people were skeptical about gaming in our back yard because we didn't know what problems might arise," recalled Robert Miguel, the tribe's chairman.

"We were always farmers," he said. "Gaming was something new."

But as the Harrah's Ak-Chin Casino near Maricopa marks its 25th anniversary — the project broke ground on May 26,1994, and opened seven months later — the venture appears to be a solid success.

The tribe recouped its financial investment years earlier than expected, and the casino, hotel, entertainment and restaurant operations have brought expanded job opportunities for local workers.

"It has been a great relationship," Miguel said. "It has done wonders for us."

Recent facelift

The property recently underwent a three-year, $180 million expansion/renovation phase that will position it for further growth.

Harrah's Ak-Chin Hotel and Casino in Maricopa is celebrating 25 years. This is the main lobby. *(Photo: Tom Tingle/The Republic)*

The effort featured a new tower that boosted the number of hotel rooms to 529 from 300. There's also a remodeled lobby, two new restaurants, expanded garage space, a new concert/events center, a new spa/fitness center and the first bingo hall in the Caesars Entertainment Corp. network.

Harrah's is a prominent brand for Caesars, which generated $8.4 billion in revenue last year.

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During the facelift and expansion, all casino operations briefly were moved into the adjacent events area. The remodel included a major overhaul of sprinkler and plumbing infrastructure, too.

"No part of the building was untouched," said Mike Kintner, the property's director of marketing and operations.

Harrah's Ak-Chin Hotel and Casino in Maricopa is celebrating 25 years. From left to right in the lobby are Robert Livingston, regional president and general manager, Harrah's Ak-Chin, Robert Miguel, chairman of the Ak-Chin Indian Community, and Michael Kintner, director of marketing & operations, Harrah's Ak-Chin. *(Photo: Tom Tingle/The Republic)*

Headline performers

The new events center has seating for more than 2,000 guests. Recent and upcoming performers include comedians Penn & Teller and Dave Chappelle, along with musicians the Righteous Brothers, Dwight Yoakam and Eddie Money.

The renovation was largely designed to position the property as a full-scale resort.

"We'll keep the hotel full, pretty much year-round," said Robert Livingston, regional president and general manager of Harrah's Ak-Chin.

Harrah's Ak-Chin Hotel and Casino in Maricopa is celebrating 25 years. This is a hotel room at the resort. *(Photo: Tom Tingle/The Republic)*

Among dining amenities, the new Oak & Fork restaurant at Ak-Chin features wine on tap. "It comes out at a perfect temperature every time they pour it," Kintner said.

That means 65 degrees for red wine and 52 degrees for white. The system uses nitrogen to push wine through the lines. Without oxygen, each serving mimics a pour from a freshly opened bottle.

Employment opportunities

In many ways, the tribe, casino and city have grown up together. Back in 2000, Maricopa wasn't incorporated yet and had a population of around 1,500, said Mayor Christian Price. Today, the city about 35 miles south of Sky Harbor International Airport counts 52,000 residents.

The tribe's population, meanwhile, has more than doubled in recent decades to 1,115 members today.

Harrah's Ak-Chin Hotel and Casino in Maricopa is celebrating 25 years. The is the cactus garden. *(Photo: Tom Tingle/The Republic)*

The casino provides a lot of jobs for local residents, ranking among Pinal County's largest employers with 900 workers. Area restaurants, gasoline stations, grocery stores and other merchants also benefit from the steady flow of visitors, most of whom come from within an hour's drive.

Jobs at the resort range from entry-level positions for teens to opportunities for employees hoping to build a career in the casino industry. The venture started with a couple hundred workers in the early 1990s.

Positions range from table dealers, slot-machine attendants, restaurant workers and maids to slot-machine technicians, managers and information-technology staff.

A variety of open positions can be seen here.

Training for tribal members

About 50 tribal members currently work there, and their training has included public speaking, guidance on how to present themselves, confidence-building tips and other soft skills, Miguel said. Various tribal-council leaders hold or have held jobs there.

Robert Miguel, chairman of the Ak-Chin Indian Community, stands poolside at the Harrah's Ak-Chin Hotel and Casino in Maricopa. The resort is celebrating 25 years. *(Photo: Tom Tingle/The Republic)*

The casino's presence has been a magnet to keep members of the small tribe in the area, Miguel said.

Connection to Caesars

Harrah's also has benefited from the partnership in which it manages the operations on behalf of the tribe, which owns the property.

Neither Harrah's nor the Ak-Chin Indian Community would provide profit or revenue figures for this article. But the venture has been growing steadily, Livingston said.

Harrah's Ak-Chin Hotel and Casino in Maricopa is celebrating 25 years. These are veterans of families on the reservation. *(Photo: Tom Tingle/The Republic)*

Harrah's Ak-Chin is the only Caesars property — whether owned, leased or managed — in Arizona. However, the company is licensing a new non-gaming Caesars resort at Scottsdale Fashion Square, expected to open in 2021.

A Caesars rewards or loyalty program enables local guests to earn points from gambling, hotel stays, restaurant meals and more. Points can be redeemed for casino play, hotel rooms and other benefits at Ak-Chin or other Caesars properties in the U.S. and some foreign nations. Livingston described this as a highly popular program and one that distinguishes Ak-Chin from other Arizona casinos.

Longstanding partnership

More than 700,000 people visit the Ak-Chin property each year, Livingston estimated. Slot machines generate more than 90% of its total revenues.

Harrah's Ak-Chin Hotel and Casino in Maricopa is celebrating 25 years. *(Photo: Tom Tingle/The Republic)*

Aside from being the only Caesars property in Arizona, the Harrah's Ak-Chin venture was the company's first management agreement with a Native American tribe, and the one that has been in place the longest, Livingston said.

The tribe was the party that made that initial outreach. "When gaming first came to Arizona, we decided we needed a name brand," Miguel said.

The tribe has used proceeds from the Ak-Chin casino to finance a host of community services including those tied to health care, and youth and elder programs.

"People here have come to understand that (gaming) has been a blessing," Miguel said.

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