

## WINNING

From page 1

his relations toiled at their jobs back in Fort Myers, is anomalous. For starters, not everyone loses as cheerfully as he, of course, and the overwhelming majority of players who make their way to the gambling emporium perched on the cusp of the Everglades come from Southwest Florida.

But Mr. Almond is indicative of a counterintuitive phenomenon: Even in these grinding economic times, the Seminole Immokalee Casino, which operates 24/7, is doing just fine. In fact, the casino is flourishing to the point that it has undertaken a \$22-million expansion, which will be completed early next year, nearly doubling the facility's size and bringing its total square footage to about 75,000 (roughly half the size of an average Target Superstore), according to Gary Bitner, the Fort Lauderdale public relations man who is spokesman for the Seminole Tribe. The expansion will add what Bitner said will be "hundreds of new jobs" to a casino workforce that now numbers about 500. Additionally, the casino recently added Las Vegas-style slot machines and 12 blackjack tables. The blackjack tables alone — the first to be placed at the Immokalee casino — required 125 new jobs, principally dealers and table watchers.

In these days of cutbacks and layoffs, the Immokalee casino stands in stark relief to the daily fare of gloomy economic news.

What's the deal?

"Even in hard times, people want entertainment," explained Bitner. "That is really what this casino is all about. It is entertainment. And even at the height of a downturn, people will look for ways to be entertained."

Details of the casino's revenues are not released, and Mr. Bitner said the Seminoles are under no obligation to do so. But Dr. Alan P. Meister, an economist who studies such things, estimated that Indian-gaming revenues in Florida last year totaled \$1.6 billion. Dr. Meister's estimate covers the state's seven Indian casinos — six of which are operated by the Seminoles and one run by the Miccosukee Tribe. According to Dr. Meister, Indian-gaming revenues in Florida for 2007 were up 2.3 percent over the previous year.

Since the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988, there has been a veritable explosion of tribal casinos and gaming facilities across the United States. There are currently 423 gambling operations run by 225 tribes in 28 states, according to the National Indian Gaming Association. Nationally, revenues have jumped from \$200 million in 1988 to \$26 billion in 2007. Total revenues for Indian gaming facilities in 2007 were more than double the revenues for all casinos in Nevada, the Mecca of American legalized gambling.

Dr. Meister did note, however, that



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Indian-gaming revenues in Florida for 2007 were up 2.3 percent over the previous year, according to Dr. Alan P. Meister, who tracks the state's seven Indian casinos.

Indian casinos both in Florida and across the nation could face challenges down the road because of the economy and "public policies designed to restrict the supply of Indian gambling."

Florida's Seminoles know something about such restrictive policies. The tribe is embroiled in a complicated legal and political tangle with the state that began last year when it signed a compact with Gov. Charlie Crist that allowed Las Vegas-style table games — such as blackjack and baccarat — in its casinos. Previously, the casinos' major draws were poker and slot machines. But many gamblers — especially the more seasoned and sophisticated — prefer the action of Vegas table games.

The U.S. Department of Interior, overseer of Indian affairs, approved the compact. What the Seminoles sought and ultimately got from Gov. Crist was an exclusive franchise on the Vegas-style games. The pact contains a pledge that the state will not allow pari-mutuels like dog and horse tracks and jai lai frontons to offer those games. In return for this exclusive right, the Seminoles agreed to pay the state more than \$100 million annually for three years and a percentage of their revenues thereafter, which could exceed the \$100 million figure.

Leaders in the Florida House of Representatives have challenged the compact in court, saying the governor could not unilaterally negotiate such a deal. The Florida Supreme Court upheld the challenge. In light of the ruling, Florida Attorney General Bill McCollum has asked that the games be suspended, but the controlling agency, the National Indian Gaming Commission, has not done so. The Legislature will address the issue in its next regular session, which begins in March, and lawmakers could formally scrap the plan or they could seek a new compact that calls for the Seminoles to pay even more money to the state.

If the state backs out of the compact, the Seminoles say they will seek federal

approval of the new games, which they likely would receive. If that occurs, the games will continue, but the state will receive no revenue from them.

The rise of Indian gaming and a staggering economy have emerged as contributing factors in the lagging performance of casinos in the traditional gambling centers of Las Vegas and Atlantic City, analysts say. Localized gambling, such as the Immokalee casino, allows many dedicated and casual gamblers alike to stay home — saving air fare, hotel charges, car rentals and food costs — and still indulge their passion.

Recent financial reports from major gaming companies reflect this trend. MGM Mirage reported an 8 percent decrease in revenues for the third quarter ended September 30. The company, citing a weak economy and tight credit, shelved plans for a new facility in Atlantic City. Harrah's Entertainment also reported a third-quarter loss. In Las Vegas, three casinos have filed for bankruptcy and the city's unemployment rate is at 5.6 percent, compared to 4.2 percent last year.

"Las Vegas is dipping, and one reason is that people don't have to travel there to have a good (gambling) experience," said Mr. Bitner.

Local gamblers who shun Las Vegas for Immokalee will sacrifice some amenities in the bargain. Pre-casino Immokalee was not much of draw, to put it charitably. The town was known principally for its agriculture and the poverty of its migrant workers. Although Immokalee's Main Street has been spiffed-up, it remains unlikely that a visitor will confuse it with Las Vegas' Strip or Atlantic City's Boardwalk. And while Las Vegas and Atlantic City continue to present top-shelf entertainers, the Immokalee casino fields acts on the order of Blood, Sweat and Tears, aging troubadours who rose to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s and performed there last month. The casino's interior, while replete with the noisy jangle and flashing lights of its 800 slot machines,

is cavernous, low on the glamour quotient and lacking the kinetic energy of, say, a big-time Las Vegas establishment. A powerful imagination is required to conjure visions of Frank, Dean and the Rat Pack holding court in the Immokalee lounge.

"The casino by itself hasn't been a large draw to the area," said Jack Wert, executive director of the Naples, Marco Islands, Everglades Convention and Visitors Bureau. "It seems to attract local residents. We are primarily a beach and golf destination, but certainly some seasonal residents might be more tempted to (visit the casino) now that it has made improvements and is expanding. We see the casino as an attractive part of the total package that this area offers. We are not known as a gaming destination, but that could change somewhat down the road. You don't know."

Seminole officials hope that the nearby development of Ave Maria, both the town and the university, will spur increased traffic through the casino, although the conservative religious orientation of the school might limit the number of high rollers it produces.

"One reason for the success of the casino has to be that the Seminoles do a great job of running their operations," said Mr. Bitner. "They really do run a top-quality operation, not only here but at their other casinos."

With such large sums of cash on the table, so to speak, a logical question is who benefits from the gambling boon, aside from casino workers and local economies. Mr. Bitner said the real winners are the some 3,300 members of Florida's Seminole Tribe.

"The proceeds (from gaming operations) fund the government of the tribe," he said.

This includes financing police and fire services, providing free health care to tribal members and an educational allotment that pays for the college education of any Florida Seminole who wishes to pursue one, Mr. Bitner said. Every Seminole receives an annual "dividend" from the casinos, although Mr. Bitner said the exact amount is not made public. Even children receive this dividend, he said, noting that those funds are put into a special trust.

It is doubtful that gamblers give much thought to their money funding the educations of Seminole children. More likely, they, as gamblers everywhere, seek action, escape and that ever-elusive jackpot. That is what drew Ronnie Lee Almond, and while he left a satisfied customer, he did voice a peripheral complaint.

"Man, getting here is the pits," he said of his journey along the sometimes-harrowing State Road 82 from Fort Myers. "I mean the trip here ain't long, but it sure sucks." The drive does not deter patrons. It was midday on a Friday when Mr. Almond spoke, but already good parking places in the casino's lot were at a premium.

The allure of a big score, it seems, easily trumps an inconvenient automotive excursion. ■

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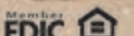
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