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Red Hawk Casino rises near Highway 50 on Shingle Springs Rancheria

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Published 12:00 am PDT Thursday, May 22, 2008

For Highway 50 motorists, construction of a sweeping overpass and interchange is the most visible sign of changes coming to the El Dorado County foothills.

But it offers only a glimpse of the transformation taking place on the 160-acre Shingle Springs Rancheria. Behind a hillside, largely hidden from motorists' view, some 400 construction workers are employed at any one time as the Red Hawk Casino moves toward its scheduled opening late this year.

"This is a fantastic, exciting project. It's the biggest project going on in California now in the gaming industry," Peter Fordham said.

Fordham, recently hired as the casino's general manager, admired the view of the snow-covered Sierra from the driveway in front of the 270,000-square-foot casino building.

Crews last week were pouring concrete for the third floor of an eight-story parking structure. The casino complex will include covered and lighted parking for 3,200 vehicles.

The rancheria, long the rural home to about 140 members of the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians, is now a bustling construction site with tight security. Visitors are stopped at a checkpoint as they enter the tribal lands from Reservation Road and directed to rows of trailers housing temporary construction offices.

A wastewater treatment plant is being built off the freeway, on the spot once occupied by a giant tent that housed a short-lived casino and bingo parlor in the 1990s. Up the hill, toward the rancheria's western edge, a new roadway leads from the freeway overpass through a geometric archway, the gateway to the new casino.

The exterior of the three-story building is largely complete. The natural-stone and earth-tone concrete facade is set off by the geometry of the wood-beamed porte-cochere. Across the driveway from the building's main entrance, the form has been poured along the hillside for a waterfall.

With construction well under way, Fordham takes on the job of building a staff of about 1,750 people.

A native of England, Fordham began his career in the casino and hospitality industry 30 years ago in his hometown of Leeds.

Fordham worked in the Bahamas and moved to the United States in 1993, where he has worked exclusively for Indian casinos.

He opened the Chukchansi Gold Resort and Casino in Coarsegold, near Fresno, and worked most recently for S&K Gaming LLC, operating casinos for the Confederated Salish and Koot-enai Tribes of northwest Montana.

In Montana, he said, the scope of games is more restricted than in California, and Indian casinos compete with non-tribal casinos.

"Every bar and restaurant can have 20 slots and poker," Fordham said.

The Red Hawk Casino, operated by Minnesota-based Lakes Entertainment, will offer about 2,000 slot machines and gaming devices, as well as 75 table games, including blackjack and pai gow poker, Fordham said.

The six restaurants will feature a range of dining options, he said, including a buffet and a gourmet restaurant, Henry's Steakhouse.

"We'll have a stage bar on the casino floor, with live entertainment nightly," Fordham said.

He is confident the Red Hawk Casino will find its niche among the region's Indian casinos, including Thunder Valley in Placer County and Cache Creek in Yolo County. Though marketing efforts initially will target the Sacramento region, Fordham said he expects eventually to draw patrons from outside the area.

With immediate access from Highway 50, Fordham said, "We are actually a pretty easy commute."

Employee recruitment is being handled via the Red Hawk Casino's Web site at www.redhawkcasino.com. A temporary employment and training center is scheduled to open July 1 in El Dorado Hills.

Preference will be given to tribal members, but Fordham said he expects to draw a significant number of job applicants from El Dorado County and the neighboring region.

Although the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department is hiring additional deputies to handle casino-related service demands, the casino will have an on-site security force. Security force members will be trained as first-responders and emergency medical technicians, Fordham said.

Tours of the rancheria, including the casino site, may be requested by contacting the Shingle Springs Community Outreach Network at: www.ssrcommunitynetwork.org.

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