

Tribal gaming cuts into tour bus traffic at Tahoe-Reno casinos

By Rob Sabo, Northern Nevada Business Weekly

Bus tours to regional casinos remain an important revenue stream for gaming properties, casino executives say, even though the number of visitors to Northern Nevada who arrive via tour bus declined drastically over the past decade.

And some are working hard to boost their bus business.

Tour buses loaded primarily with seniors from California eager to pull the handles of slot machines and collect buckets of nickels once were a common sight at Reno-Sparks casino properties. However, the widespread inception of tribal gaming throughout Northern California has curtailed the once-popular day trips to gamble in The Biggest Little City.

Revenues from bus tours at Grand Sierra Resort declined by 66 percent after the property dropped the Hilton flag, says new General Manager Bill Wright.

"It was a very viable business, but when the property went from the Hilton to the Grand Sierra it appears to have changed its philosophy," says Wright, who also worked as general manager of the Flamingo Hilton before leaving the area for Las Vegas in 2001.

Michelle Williams, sales manager for the Eldorado for the past six years, formerly worked with a motor coach company specializing in bus tours to Reno. Williams says that market used to make up a substantial revenue stream, and although it has diminished, all customers are vital to the health of Reno casinos.

“The last few years primarily the economy has affected it more than anything,” Williams says. “Indian gaming certainly has affected our business, but people still do want to get out of California and come to Nevada.”

Wright, who joined Grand Sierra Resort in May, says boosting revenues from bus tours is part of several new strategies to be put in place at the 2,000-room hotel property.

“When leisure demand is not enough to fill your rooms, we are looking at each and every avenue we can to drive room nights,” he says. “We have got such big square footage on the casino floor and with the number of rooms, and the challenge is finding customers to fill the capacity we have. That is one segment that has worked in the past, and we feel it is viable again.”

In the past few years revenue generated from bus tours has become minuscule for properties in Carson City and the Carson Valley, says Bill Henderson, longtime director of sales for Carson Valley Inn in Minden. Properties such as the CVI and Ormsby House in Carson City used to benefit from overnight bus tours to Reno that often took patrons on side trips to Carson Valley properties and South Lake Tahoe.

Henderson, who also worked at South Lake Tahoe properties prior to his 27-year stint at Carson Valley Inn, says it wasn't uncommon to see 60 or 70 buses per day arriving at large South Lake Tahoe casinos.

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