

Reno recognizes gaming isn't what brings people to town

By Norimitsu Onishi, New York Times

RENO – Apple? The outdoors? Bowling?

As Reno, that other city in Nevada, seeks to move beyond an economy and a downtown dominated for decades by mammoth casinos, it is grasping at various possibilities that have little to do with the industry that defined it.

Apple announced in late June that it would build a \$1 billion data center here, even as Reno was cementing its reputation as one of the country's bowling meccas by hosting several tournaments at the 78-lane National Bowling Stadium.

Meanwhile, an advertising campaign promoting the area's outdoor activities is aimed at a diverse array of tourists, including, for the first time, same-sex couples. "What's your passion?" asks the campaign, which has nearly no mention of gambling.

The arrival of Indian casinos and the spread of state-sanctioned gambling across the nation have cut deeply into the revenues of former monopolies on legalized gambling like Las Vegas and Atlantic City. But none was as devastated as Reno, whose customers came mostly from the Bay Area and other corners of California. Instead of driving a couple hundred miles and crossing the Sierra Nevada, Californians just headed for slot machines at Indian casinos close to home.

In what many here considered a sign of the times, downtown Reno's showcase gambling establishment, the Silver Legacy Resort Casino – a 35-story, 1,700-room giant whose opening in 1995 was supposed to usher in a new golden age for the city – filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in late May. Its

owners have said the filing will not affect operations, a pledge seemingly reinforced by announcements of the coming acts, including Cheap Trick on Aug. 3, on a billboard next to its 120-foot replica of a mining rig.

Other fading casinos and some empty buildings loom over a small downtown that has been largely abandoned by residents. Reno, which was also hit particularly hard during the housing crisis, has struggled to reinvent itself precisely because it has been a single-industry city, experts say. Even before gambling, Reno made a name for itself by offering quick divorces, but it also lost that business in the 1960s after other states loosened restrictions on divorce.

“Reno has had it easy until recently because it had a monopoly on things that were illegal in the other states,” said Alicia Barber, a historian at the University of Nevada, Reno, and the author of “Reno’s Big Gamble.” “But now it’s facing tough questions for the first time. It’s like a child star that still wants the world’s attention.”

After peaking in 2000, when Indian casino gambling took off in California, gambling revenues in Reno have fallen by a third. What is more, gambling revenues per square foot of floor space are down nearly a quarter, according to the Center for Gaming Research at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

City officials and experts say that gambling will not disappear from Reno, but that its importance to the city, as well as its influence, has been waning.

Wanting to keep gamblers inside their buildings, hotel casinos did not support and sometimes opposed the development of other city attractions, businesspeople say. They had little interest in the University of Nevada, Reno, whose campus lies just a few blocks north of downtown, because students have little money to gamble.

“In the past, we had hotels turn down our business because

they didn't want bowler groups," said Joe Kelley, the general manager of the National Bowling Stadium.

Until around 2000, Mr. Kelley said, a dozen tour buses would arrive daily at the Silver Legacy or the Eldorado next door. "As the patrons got off the bus," he said, "somebody would hand them a roll of quarters and a coupon for the buffet. Every morning. And the buses, they don't come here anymore. So they look to us to fill their property."

Also completed in 1995, the bowling stadium is scheduled to undergo a \$15 million renovation, including the addition of 10 lanes. Last month, the United States Bowling Congress agreed to hold championship tournaments here through 2030.

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