

Ex-Tahoe exec to run Calif.'s largest Indian casino

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

ROHNERT PARK – Anita Silva, 82, never felt deprived by her humble upbringing in a drafty shack with no indoor plumbing on a reservation in Sonoma County. Despite economic hardships, she said simply, “I didn’t remember that there were any.”

Silva, a tribal elder for the Federated Indians of the Graton Rancheria, instead reflects on her years working in Indian health care, on her grandchildren and great-grandchildren – and on how much she loves playing the slots at Northern California tribal casinos. She still talks excitedly about the 94 bucks she won at the Dry Creek rancheria in one glorious payout two years ago.

Now, in the culmination of an improbable journey, Silva and fellow tribal members are about to get their own casino – and the proceeds from perhaps the grandest and most lucrative tribal gambling establishment in California.

On Tuesday, the 1,300-member tribe will open its Graton Resort & Casino, an \$800 million development in the Sonoma County wine country. Situated next to Highway 101 in Rohnert Park, it will be the closest tribal casino to San Francisco and is expected to instantly rival Thunder Valley Casino Resort in Lincoln for supremacy in the California gambling market.

Industry analysts say the new development – with 3,000 slot machines and 144 gambling tables beneath chandeliers that glitter with 24,000 pink glass flower petals – may transform gambling in California, intensifying competition among high-end resorts and the pressure to build casinos near major highways and urban centers.

“This is the bear – no, make that the \$800 million gorilla,” said Ken Adams, a Reno-based casino industry analyst. “It certainly is going to grow the total amount of gaming revenue in California. It’s going to force Cache Creek and Thunder Valley to respond competitively. ... We’re off to the races.”

Cheryl Schmit, an anti-gambling advocate who is fighting a major casino development another tribe plans near Highway 99 in Madera County, said the Graton resort and its prime location may signal a gambling future far different than voters envisioned when they approved tribal casinos in California.

“Here we have this massive Las Vegas-style casino very close to an urban area at the gateway to San Francisco,” Schmit said. “Everyone is pushing forward. We’re going to wake up in a few years and California will be a full-service gaming state.”

A 2012 Standard and Poor’s market assessment said the Graton resort, to be managed by Las Vegas-based Station Casinos Inc., could generate annual gambling revenue of more than \$530 million by 2016. General manager Joe Hasson, who formerly ran the Harrah’s and Harveys resorts in Stateline, said the opening is being promoted in the Bay Area market with radio and TV spots airing with “such frequency that we could elect someone governor.”

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