

Tunica accustomed to tough times, takes trouble in stride

Despite cuts, it's still better than before the casinos came

By Roland Klose, Memphis Commercial Appeal
Sunday, September 20, 2009

ROBINSONVILLE, Miss. -- It's a Friday morning at Harrah's Tunica, and more than 120 people already are on the casino floor, hitting the slots.

Flashing lights, electronic noise, and an inescapable soft rock soundtrack give the place a festi feel, but one wouldn't know from watching the players. Nobody talks or smiles when there are buttons to push and spinning reels to watch -- at least not at 9 a.m.

Just a few miles south, at the WIN Job Center, the mood also is serious -- no music or flashing just a couple of men stationed at the office's computers, quietly hunting for work. One studies a casino's Web site; another struggles to fill out an online application form.

Just like patrons at a casino, these job-seekers are playing against the odds.



Alan Spearman/The Commercial Appeal

Freddie Brandon, 62, credits the casinos for positive changes on Gay Street in North Tunica. He grew up here and said most of the houses were once in the same condition as the old frame hc above. Since the casinos' arrival, they have been upgraded, he said.



Alan Spearman/The Commercial Appeal

The disco at 856 Magnolia has been a fixture since the '80s. Before casinos brought big-time gambling, locals offered games that likely helped create a path for Tunica County to legalize ca gambling in 1991.



Alan Spearman/The Commercial Appeal

According to the Tunica County Chamber of Commerce, the nine casinos in the county employ 14,000 people in 2008, which is down from a 2007 high of 17,000.



Alan Spearman/The Commercial Appeal

Curtis Curry greets Sheila Lenz and Micki Anderson of Salem, Ind., outside the Paula Dean Bu Harrah's Casino. Curry is a natural greeter -- he claps, does an enthusiastic cheer and tells eve soul who passes to eat at the buffet that he loves them. Curtis commutes from Clarksdale Miss the job he loves. In 2008, Harrah's spent \$45 million for updates including the buffet.



Alan Spearman/The Commercial Appeal

At the WIN Job Center, Tarrison Black, 19, seeks assistance with his aspiration to become a bel at a casino hotel. Office manager Janet Scott helps Black while many others fill out casino job applications.



Alan Spearman/The Commercial Appeal

Sporting clays whiz by at the Willows Hunting Center at Harrah's Casino. The 2010 U.S. Open Sporting Clays will be held at the Willows, and Harrah's will build more courses to accommodate shooters they expect to attract.



Alan Spearman/The Commercial Appeal

Lineman Mario Wooten guides in a jet carrying 117 casino visitors at the Tunica Municipal Airport. In 2008, 59,747 people arrived in Tunica at the airport, up significantly from the 14,500 visitors in 2007.

STORY TOOLS

- [E-mail story](#)
- [Comments \(16\)](#)
- [Printer friendly](#)

RELATED LINKS

- [The Mississippi Gaming Commission](#)
- [Tunica Convention and Visitors Bureau: Casinos in Tunica](#)

MORE BUSINESS NEWS

- [Investor snaps up properties, resells at below-value prices](#)
- [People in Business](#)
- [What to do this week](#)

SHARE AND ENJOY [?]



Tunica's casinos -- once-mighty job-creation machines in the Mississippi Delta -- have been wracked with a steady drop in revenues since the beginning of 2007. At least one has reported an operating loss this year; another casino is up for sale. And all of them have shed employees -- more than 10,000 casino workers have lost work in the Tunica region in the past two years, based on Mississippi Gaming Commission records.

The casinos' difficulties have had a ripple effect, pushing unemployment in Tunica County and one of its neighboring counties back into double digits. Local government has had to deal with the

first significant drop in revenues in recent memory. And social-service agencies report more requests for emergency assistance.

The downturn wasn't all that apparent until recently, said Freddie Brandon, a longtime employee of Catholic Social Services in Tunica. As unemployment benefits began to run out and people fell behind on mortgage payments and car notes, requests for help started ticking higher.

"It seems like it's getting worse," Brandon said. "And at the same time we have the greatest need but we have fewer resources."

Nationally, the casino industry has marked almost uninterrupted growth since the expansion of legalized gaming in the 1990s. According to the American Gaming Association, commercial casinos accounted for more than \$32 billion in revenues in 2008.

Until recently, smart folks on Wall Street thought the business was recession-resilient.

It sure seemed that way in Tunica County.

Back in 2003, Thomas A. Garrett, now assistant vice president of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, examined the economic impact of casino gaming in the Midwest and South. His report for Tunica County residents comprised 30 percent of the area's casino workforce, helping push the unemployment rate down to the 5 percent range.

Garrett said he's not surprised that Tunica is feeling the effects of its casinos' difficulties.

"If you think a casino is going to be a cure-all for your local economy, it's only going to be true if it becomes a major industry, as it did in Tunica," Garrett said. "But that also opens them up to the cyclical effects of the national economy."

What's happening in Tunica mirrors other regional gaming centers; all are reporting revenue decreases of 5-10 percent, said William Eadington, professor of economics at the University of Nevada, Reno, and director of the Institute for the Study of Gambling and Commercial Gaming.

Tunica's woes, however, don't compare to those in Las Vegas, which has been in a freefall for 10 years now, Eadington said.

In Sin City, the collapse has been dramatic. There, a massive building boom, fueled by heavy construction, screeched to a halt in 2008 -- and many construction projects sit idle. The housing market has tanked, and for-sale signs and foreclosure notices are facts of life. Hotels and restaurants are offering deep discounts to lure customers.

The Tunica area, however, faces different kinds of challenges.

As a regional gaming center, it draws customers from a 200- to 300-mile radius. If gas prices climb too high -- as they did in the summer of 2008 -- some patrons won't make the trip. And with gaming opportunities continuing to expand all over the country, they have plenty of alternatives.

Both Missouri and Illinois, states with casinos, recently liberalized their gambling laws. In November Missourians repealed the state's \$500 loss limit -- a restriction that kept high rollers, folks willing to risk big sums, away. And in July, Illinois legalized video poker -- so-called convenience gambling which has the potential of turning every local bar and tavern into a mini-casino.

Over the years, those two Midwest states fed a small, but significant, number of customers to Tunica. The number of Missouri and Illinois visitors, however, has dropped dramatically -- down almost 40 percent in the past two years.

A measure of the increased competition: Tunica, which at one time was the No. 3 gaming market in the country, behind Las Vegas and Atlantic City, is now No. 6, according to the American Gaming Association, and No. 7, St. Louis, is closing in fast.

All of which points out Tunica's biggest challenge, Eadington said.

Unlike other gaming centers -- many of them tourism destinations before they added casinos -- Tunica didn't offer much, except cotton fields, before the first casino opened its doors, in 1992.

"With no insult intended, Tunica does not have natural amenities," Eadington said.

"To become another Las Vegas or Atlantic City is quite difficult. Las Vegas, Reno, Niagara Falls, Biloxi, Lake Tahoe, Atlantic City, Palm Springs -- all of those areas already had a significant tourism infrastructure -- they had tourism before they had casinos."

Lyn Arnold, president and CEO of the Tunica County Chamber of Commerce, said local officials have long recognized they couldn't place all their bets on gaming.

"We are working very hard to diversify this economy," she said. "No one industry solves all your problems."

Arnold said local officials are trying to do a better job of marketing the region, including Memphis and promoting other amenities, including the county's three golf courses. County tourism officials also are pushing ahead with plans for the Gateway to the Blues visitor center and museum to capitalize on the region's rich blues heritage, which brings curious international visitors to places like Clarksdale and Indianola.

"The culture and heritage of the Delta is something we need to be marketing," said Webster Franklin, president and CEO of the Tunica Convention and Visitors Bureau, who is leading the effort on the blues center and museum.

"What I hope happens is that we'll draw the blues enthusiasts to the state and give them an authentic experience while they're here, and at the same time they'll stay in our hotels and hopefully play slot machines," Franklin said.

Nobody, however, expects gaming in Tunica County to return to the level of just a few years ago.

Tunica County government gets a portion of the state's 12 percent tax on gross gaming revenue. This year, the county's share was down nearly 10 percent, from \$43.2 million in fiscal year 2008 to \$39 million in the current fiscal year, said Clifton Johnson, Tunica County administrator.

When Hurricane Katrina knocked out Mississippi's Gulf Coast casinos and depressed statewide gaming receipts, Tunica County saw a drop in revenue, but nothing that compared to this, Johnson said.

"This is the first time we've had such a drop," he said.

"In my opinion, we'll see things level off, but I don't think we'll see it where it was the highest peak. And I think it's because of the competition. Now we have casinos all over the country," Johnson said.

Over at Catholic Social Services, Freddie Brandon, 62, remembers what it was like before the casinos came.

"It was tough. The only work here was farm work -- chopping and picking cotton. It was a struggle trying to make it."

Casinos changed everything in Tunica County, said Brandon.

"They gave people the opportunity to step up in life. People were able to purchase homes, buy decent cars and everything," he said.

While he's deeply concerned about people who've lost work, and are struggling for the first time in their lives to pay mortgage loans and car notes, Brandon said he's not worried that Tunica will return to what it was before.

"The casinos turned things around 100 percent," he said.

Where the action is

The Tunica casino market, which includes nine casinos in Tunica County and one in Coahoma County, ranks sixth in the nation, based on gross revenue (in billions)

1. Las Vegas Strip, \$6.12
2. Atlantic City, N.J., \$4.54
3. Chicagoland (northern Ill. and Ind.) \$2.25
4. Connecticut \$1.57
5. Detroit \$1.36
6. *Tunica and Lula, Miss*, \$1.10
7. St. Louis \$1.03
8. Biloxi, Miss. \$0.95
9. Shreveport, La. \$0.84
10. Boulder Strip, Nev. \$0.83

Source: American Gaming Association, based on figures provided by The Innovation Group (March 2009)

-- Roland Klose: 529-3136



Comments

There are **16 responses** to this article.

Comments are meant to offer our readers a forum for thoughtful, robust debate about local issues.

Comments are moderated, but you may find the content of the conversations offensive, objectionable or factually disputable.

Comment List

The [Commercial Appeal](#) does not necessarily condone the comments here, nor does it review or post or respond to every suggestion for a comment to be removed.

Before you post, consider this:

Keep it clean. Comments containing obscene, profane, vulgar, lewd or sexually-oriented language including creative spelling and typographical representations of foul language -- will be removed.
Be truthful. Don't lie or spread rumors about anyone or anything. Stick to discussing what is factually known.

Be nice. Don't threaten anyone, and do not post any comments that involve racism, sexism or other -ism that degrades another person. Hateful or offensive comments will not be tolerated.

Police yourselves. Hit the "Suggest Removal" button to alert us to objectionable comments. Do not respond to trolls or those who seek to harass another poster.

Please read our official [Terms of Use](#).

Posted by **stemar** on September 20, 2009 at 12:23 a.m.

[Reply to this post](#) | [Suggest removal](#)

so 19-20 billion a year total??

why not let Obama make a public gaming option that uses all profit to insure the poor??

Like the Lottery does for education the Gov casino could give us health care with no need to unequitably tax anyone. these gamblers are already spending the money

Posted by **AdvilsDevocate** on September 20, 2009 at 1:28 a.m.

[Reply to this post](#) | [Suggest removal](#)

I was at Sam's Town tonight for the first time since April and I've never seen the place so busy. to park out by the RV parking, I had to wait for a table in the buffet, and I had to walk around searching for open slots... I was walking around with money to gamble and nowhere to sit and gamble it. If Tunica is hurting, it sure didn't look that way tonight.

Posted by **ShakeRattleNRoll** on September 20, 2009 at 8:52 a.m.

[Reply to this post](#) | [Suggest removal](#)

it's not hurting. it's killing it. just not annihilating it like it was before. somehow, i don't think they suffer. the poster above has confirmed that. they would have you believe the doors will close if don't hurry down there!! another factor is the "feeder" city. this one is Memphis. need i say more

Posted by **DesotoMSA** on September 20, 2009 at 10:43 a.m.

[Reply to this post](#) | [Suggest removal](#)

in response to perry057

I hope everyone calls Perry and tells him to purchase an ad if he wants to advertise in the paper Jeez..

Posted by **hatxcat** on September 20, 2009 at 10:53 a.m.

[Reply to this post](#) | [Suggest removal](#)

in response to [perry057](#)

Please tell me this is a joke. The grammar gives me a headache.

Posted by **neondragon** on September 20, 2009 at 11:19 a.m.

[Reply to this post](#) | [Suggest removal](#)

Now they are whining about profits?

Bet the top executives are still raking it in, while they make policies that chase away revenue.

The casinos in Tunica had a bunch of bright guys and gals come in from the home office and 'improve' things a few years ago, and they have been getting rid of employees, cutting corners, chasing away loyal customers ever since.

Posted by **denniskaren** on September 20, 2009 at 11:31 a.m.

[Reply to this post](#) | [Suggest removal](#)

A fool and his money are soon departed!

God

Posted by **chanteuse** on September 20, 2009 at 12:34 p.m.

[Reply to this post](#) | [Suggest removal](#)

A few years ago, I read that Tunica county had the highest bankruptcy rate in the country. This before the "recession".

Posted by **freemilk1** on September 20, 2009 at 2:17 p.m.

[Reply to this post](#) | [Suggest removal](#)

MAYBE IF THE GAMING COMISSION WOULD DO THEIR JOB AND THE CASINO HAD THE MACHINES SET RIGHT THEN THEIR BUSINESS WOULD PICK BACK UP??? PEOPLE GET TIRED OF LOSING ALL THEIR MONEY EVERYTIME THEY GO THERE. IT'S NOT THE RECESSION... ITS BECAUSE PEOPLE KNOW YOU CAN'T EVER WIN LIKE YOU ONCE CO WHEN THE MACHINES WERE SET RIGHT.TUNICA HAS THE REPUTATION AS A RIP OFF NOW! THE OWNERS HAVE BECOME SO GREEDY, THEY AREN'T PLAYING FAIR!

Posted by **SamGould** on September 20, 2009 at 2:53 p.m.

[Reply to this post](#) | [Suggest removal](#)

Who is this "perry" and what radio station is he on?

Posted by **ShakeRattleNRoll** on September 20, 2009 at 2:57 p.m.

[Reply to this post](#) | [Suggest removal](#)

in response to [chanteuse](#)

please pass it.

Posted by **winnertakesall** on September 20, 2009 at 4:47 p.m.

[Reply to this post](#) | [Suggest removal](#)

which casino is up for sale?

Posted by **7thInning** on September 20, 2009 at 6:42 p.m.

[Reply to this post](#) | [Suggest removal](#)

Another Mississippi business that is shored up by Tennessee. If it weren't for the chumps pouri

into Tunica from Tennessee everyday, Mississippi would have a for sale sign for all of Tunica c
Can't you people down there do anything right?

Posted by **stemar** on September 20, 2009 at 8:41 p.m.

[Reply to this post](#) | [Suggest removal](#)

Perry put in a post advertizeing HIS internet call in show. The CA reomoved it COMPLETELY.

He violated these parts...

.
.

(v) solicit other users to join or become members of any commercial online service or other organization without our prior written approval;

.
.

(iv) is an advertisement for goods or services or a solicitation of funds;

Posted by **CDF** on September 20, 2009 at 10:03 p.m.

[Reply to this post](#) | [Suggest removal](#)

I'd also like to know which Casino is up for sale. Also, I agree with freemilk1. We are tired of NE winning in Tunica.

Really wish we could find a way to float a Gambling barge near the Pyramid. Then, the "BassPi other similar type establishment with a nice "family friendly" hotel could fill up the real estate wii paying guests, tax revenues for Memphis, and many needed jobs. (Perry Steele is for the birds

Posted by **phillips182** on September 21, 2009 at 12:59 a.m.

[Reply to this post](#) | [Suggest removal](#)

in response to [denniskaren](#)

You are so right. Our son is a certified financial advisor/planner in a medium size town in Middl Tennessee. A year or so ago a man from there won One Million Dollars at Tunica on the Penny Slots, whatever that is. I am not a gambler and don't know all the jargon. He met with my son's for some advice about how to handle the money. In the end, he paid for his house and took the back to Tunica. Long story short, his house is paid for but...he could have been set for life. One of 'millions' of sad gambling stories. Sad, sad, sad.