

Knowing when to hold them

Neil Bluhm patiently waited almost a decade to open Rivers Casino

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As **Neil Bluhm** walked through the sophisticated high-roller lounge of his newest casino Thursday, I asked him, "Do you ever gamble?"

"No," he said, prompting his gaming chief to remind the Chicago billionaire about a trip to Las Vegas last fall. So Bluhm supplied a different answer.

"I gamble putting one of these deals together," he said with zeal. "I spent millions of dollars not knowing whether we were going to have a casino. So do I gamble? Yes."

Due to a regulatory and political drama worthy of a Danielle Steel novel, nearly a decade passed from the day Bluhm scouted the site of his Rivers Casino in Des Plaines to its scheduled grand opening Monday.

In the meantime, the 73-year-old opened three other casinos in Vicksburg, Miss., Pittsburgh and Philadelphia between October 2008 and September 2010. He also continued paying for the rights to buy the 22.5 acres of land bordering Rosemont, in the hopes that the Illinois Gaming Board would re-auction the state's 10th and potentially last casino license after it was revoked from the previous winning bidder.

By the time Bluhm, a veteran real estate investor who lives downtown, got a second shot at the license in 2008, he had already spent about \$8 million on the project. The total bill for the 148,000-square-foot facility: nearly \$445 million, about \$300 million of which is being financed with bank loans and bonds.

"We're long-term oriented with staying power," Bluhm said of the controversy. "We just waited it out."

Still, the future is not trouble-free: Pending legislation could ring Rivers Casino with competitors, including a downtown Chicago location, and Bluhm's local partners in Philadelphia have sued, demanding more say in casino operations there.

It is clear Bluhm spared few expenses on his latest project. The 1,500-spot parking garage has LED lights above each space, which appear green if the space is open and red if it is taken. That feature cost \$800,000, said **Greg Carlin**, 44, the chief executive of all of Bluhm's gaming

companies. The lotus-shaped light fixture above the "Lotus Bar" cost more than \$1 million, Carlin added. The smoking patio has heaters, fans, a fireplace and TVs.

"We're trying to cater to everybody," Bluhm said.

Many design touches were borrowed from some of [Steve Wynn's](#) Las Vegas properties; the interior designer of the casino area, **Ken Kulas**, previously worked for Wynn's Mirage Resorts. In fact, Bluhm said Wynn was originally one of his partners on the Des Plaines project.

"I remember sitting in a meeting with him where he said, 'Gosh, what's going to be more successful, (Wynn) Macau or Illinois?'" Carlin said. "Well, Macau has been outrageously successful. He picked Macau. He just had too many things going on. We're still friends."

"We had a great arrangement with him," Bluhm added as he spoke over the sounds of drills. "He just decided not to spend his time here. Look it, this took us 10 years to get here."

On Thursday, the casino was packed with workers, from bartenders-in-training to tradesmen. One contractor drilled holes for the handrails leading up to the bar, while another stapled new felt to the [blackjack](#) tables.

Janitors polished the chrome grilles of the escalator platform. The casino's advertising firm shot B-roll in the coffee shop, which will be open 22 hours a day. The high-limit room smelled of freshly applied wood varnish. Coins clanked as workers in pocketless dark blue jumpsuits stocked the slot machines.

Since Bluhm is prohibited by state rules from gambling in his own casino, his pride is the food.

"This place is awesome; you won't believe this," he said as he entered the upscale all-you-can-eat buffet, which serves, among other dishes, ceviche and lamb chops.

"Look at that roast beef," Bluhm said. "Does that look good or am I imagining? You know sometimes you have a gambling exclusion, where you put your name on a list and they don't let you in. I'm putting myself on a buffet exclusion."

"Neil likes to eat," Carlin teased.

Bluhm wanted a Gibsons [Restaurant](#) Group outpost in the facility and got the firm to open a Hugo's Frog Bar & Chop House. Bluhm eats at the Hugo's in the Gold Coast so often that when he eats at the adjacent Gibsons Bar & Steak House, the managers allow him to order from the Hugo's menu.

Lighting is the last detail to be ironed out; Carlin met with the lighting designer late Thursday night.

"We were focusing the (security) cameras last week, and the way these canopies were designed it was reflecting too much," Carlin said. "So we had to change the light levels to make sure the cameras could read the cards and the players' eyes were comfortable."

On Thursday, Carlin said he was in Philadelphia, checking lighting levels there with a [hand](#)-held meter.

Bluhm turned toward the soaring lobby and saw a line of people waiting outside.

"What are all these people, Greg?" he asked

Customers had come to sign up for Players Club Cards, the casino's loyalty [program](#), in advance of the opening. Carlin had directed that water and ice cream be delivered to everyone in line.

"We think we're going to have a capacity issue," Carlin said.