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Casino bets that it's time for change

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NIAGARA FALLS—As it nears its 10th anniversary in Niagara Falls, the Seneca Gaming Corp. is planning a series of upgrades to its Fourth Street casino.

Gambling corporation officials told The Buffalo News last week they plan to overhaul two main areas of the casino, one a popular spot for gamblers and hotel guests and the other a hangout for their most exclusive customers.

Both the Thunder Falls Buffet and the Chairman's Club VIP area will be revamped before New Year's Eve, when the Senecas mark their 10th year in the Falls.

"Those are two major pieces for our Niagara Falls property," said Jim Wise, senior vice president of marketing for Seneca Gaming Corp. "These are all important ways for us to remind the market that this is our flagship property, and we're going to be reinventing it in the same diligent way we're putting money into [our other casinos]."

Work will begin first on the Chairman's Club lounge, in the east side of the casino that was added onto the former Niagara Falls Convention Center space. Chairman's Club members earn gambling points they can use to receive discounts and other perks at the casino and other Seneca properties.

Space will be taken from the high-limit table games area to increase seating in the Chairman's Club. Bar space will also be doubled.

"That just seems to be such a centerpiece of the action and interest among the guests, so [it makes sense] to expand that space," Wise said. "Those are our very best customers, and we need to really reshape that room on their behalf and really define it."

The gambling corporation has hired Sosh Architects of New York City and Atlantic City, N.J., to redesign the lounge. The firm helped design the ESPN Zone in New York, casinos as far away as Kazakhstan and a version of the Seneca Buffalo Creek Casino in Buffalo that was scrapped in favor of a smaller design, according to the firm's website.

Construction will begin shortly after Labor Day and is expected to take six to eight weeks, officials said. A temporary lounge area will be available during the construction.

Thunder Falls Buffet, a staple for hungry gamblers since its opening, will be redesigned in October in anticipation of the large crowds between Christmas and New Year's Eve.

The redesign will essentially "bring the buffet to the casino" by creating new pathways through the gambling floor that make it easier for gamblers to find the buffet.

"We think it's important that we kind of [present] the facility in a more blended way, so when you're on the casino floor, some of those amenities that are just off the casino floor don't seem so compartmentalized or separate off the floor," Wise said.

Workers will also redesign the actual buffet, with new food choices and a setup that will look more like a European farmers' market and will include live cooking stations where customers can see their food prepared in front of them.

Officials also anticipate the unveiling of a new LCD sign atop the casino tower that will announce activities at the casino. The sign will be seen throughout the downtown tourism district and in Niagara Falls, Ont.

The Fourth Street entrance to the casino is clearly labeled from under the former convention center canopy, but the 26-story hotel, remains unlabeled. Gambling corporation officials say they want tourists on both sides of the border to know exactly what the casino is and what it offers.

"It does give us a great opportunity, not to do the easy thing and slap the six letters 'CASINO' on top and call it a day, but to use a LED screen to welcome people into our market, talk about upcoming promotions [and] talk about who we are," Wise said.

At the same time, officials are preparing to mark the 10th anniversary of the casino, which opened with much anticipation and rave reviews on New Year's Eve 2002.

Patrons at the time said the casino marked a new era in the development of Niagara Falls, and officials regularly point out that the casino creates a flow of downtown traffic — and until recently, slots revenue—for the city.

The spinoff development that some anticipated, though, has yet to develop on a large scale, and some downtown business owners, including developer Carl P. Paladino, say the company enjoys unfair advantages by not paying taxes on its properties

Seneca officials struck a more positive tone last week, pointing to the 3,700 people the company employs, its \$1 billion investment in its properties and the \$100 million it spends annually with other Western New York companies.

"Marking our 10th anniversary will be a very significant milestone," Cathy Walker, president and chief executive of the gaming corporation, said in a statement. "The opening of Seneca Niagara Casino in 2002 helped change the economic landscape in Niagara Falls and Western New York."