



A new Harrah's management team has ushered in a fresh regime of thinking, managing and marketing the urban gaming experiment in a redesigned building.

When Harrah's New Orleans casino opened its doors three days before Halloween last month, almost everyone involved in the \$850 million project prayed that day would also be the end of a rocky start-up for the nation's first permanent, urban, land-based casino.

This second time around, parent Harrah's Entertainment chairman Phil Satre says the company has learned valuable lessons from its aborted past in New Orleans. "We learned there were some political challenges that were underestimated, but we're behind all those now," Satre said last summer. "The great news about New Orleans is it's a brand new casino in a great location, and we think it's going to be right on target for a wonderful casino in one of this country's great cities."

During the gala opening, Mardi Gras beads emblazoned with a grinning Harrah's jester rained down on the VIP and media crowd of nearly 3,000 guests at the private party that preceded the evening public opening. High-rollers and press flew in for three days of headliner entertainment by the cream of New Orleans' music scene: Dr. John, Aaron Neville, Pete Fountain, and the Radiators, to name just a few, as well as Jim Belushi in the ballroom.

The premier was just a month shy of the four-year anniversary of the shutdown of Harrah's temporary casino, which collapsed in bankruptcy on Thanksgiving Eve 1995 after less than seven months of operation in a high-crime area on the edge of a housing project. An ineffective marketing campaign had sealed the trial casino's kickoff efforts—the property never once broke even (see sidebar).

But now a new Harrah's management team has ushered in a fresh regime of thinking and

managing and marketing the urban gaming experiment in a redesigned building. Their attitude: "This time, we're going to get it right."

A new kind of Harrah's

Jay Sevigny, president and chief operating officer of Harrah's New Orleans Management Co., says the latest property in the stable of Harrah's Entertainment Co. is a new kind of casino for the company.

"Harrah's hasn't opened a land-based casino since Atlantic City in 1993," Sevigny says. "And it's a good argument that Harrah's New Orleans casino represents a new generation of Harrah's casinos. It's denser, there's more attention to detail everywhere you look."

"Every original thing about New Orleans is right outside the door," says Sevigny. "We aren't trying to pretend to be the original. We are, after all, a casino, and this is a highly themed, artfully decorated casino that capitalizes on the best of New Orleans—its location, its music, its heritage and the lingering sense of entertainment and environment that makes this place so popular."

The 225,000-square-foot building boasts 2,900 slots and 120 tables in 100,000 square feet of gaming space. The ground floor is divided into five "courts," a spectacle which goes beyond the initial vision of a Disneyesque theme-park reproduction of New Orleans.

- The Mardi Gras Court's ceiling roils with huge vivid swirls reminiscent of Van Gogh's "Starry Night." Banks of slots are topped with 30-foot-long carnival floats built by the same people who build floats for the real event in the Big Easy. A French Quarter balcony arcade lines the walls.

- A shipwrecked Jean Lafitte reigns over Barataria Cove in the Smugglers Court in a 30-foot-long

animated pirate ship with a sound and light show. Five kiosks from local restaurateurs offer stand-up snacks, as much food as the casino is allowed to serve besides its buffet.

- The Court of Good Fortune, with a private entrance for high-rollers, includes private playing rooms, a VIP lounge and finger food in a New Orleans Garden District setting surrounded by life-size gold-leaf palm trees.

- The central Jazz Court, which boasts a fiber-glass live-oak tree spreading 70 feet across and more than five stories high, is showered around the clock by shooting stars in a domed fiber-optic night sky in the circular room. Bas-relief sculptures depict the varying forms of jazz and blues.

- The Court of the Mansion with a 250-seat buffet promises to rival the high-end casino buffets that have evolved on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. A 10,000-square-foot ballroom is lined with life-size murals of an antebellum ball. A multilevel poker room is adorned with a rare collection of seven life-sized reproductions of originals by whimsical "Blue Dog" painter George Rodrigue, a Louisiana native.

Across the street from Harrah's and the Convention Center, Harrah's owns a pair of parking garages with a capacity for more than 1,900 cars, accessible through an underground tunnel.

No gaming is allowed on the casino's second floor, but as part of the bankruptcy negotiations, the city of New Orleans agreed to allow Harrah's to develop the second floor into a mixed-use entertainment venue. Harrah's New Orleans' owner, Jazz Casino Co., must submit a final master plan for the second floor near the end of January for approval by the New Orleans City Council and the Louisiana Gaming Control Board.

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