

Elk Valley, Lucky 7 casinos reopen with reduced operations

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As the state of California continues to loosen its stay at home rules that were in place to combat the spread of the coronavirus, residents were happy to learn the two nearest casinos were back in limited operation.

Sally Tatro, 74, from Brookings, quickly won \$100 in slots off a starting amount of \$20 at the Lucky 7 Casino, which she used to frequent quite often before it closed in mid March.

“I thought, finally. I’m glad they were doing it,” Tatro said about the reopening. “Everybody in Brookings was going crazy. There was nothing to do. Even the bowling alley closed.”

Wearing a surgical mask at her favorite slot machine, Tatro said she has diabetes and COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), so she was happy with the precautions the casino took, even though she was too worried about coronavirus.

“I believe if you’re going to get it, you’re going to get it,” she said.

To help make the environment safer in their phased reopenings, both casinos take temperatures from a single-entry point into the casino. While the Lucky 7 uses a handheld device, the Elk Valley installed thermal imaging cameras that take your temperature while waiting in line. Anyone with a temperature above 100.4 degrees will be denied entry at both casinos.

“There’s a secondary camera just in case, and a further backup hand-held device as the third line of defense,” said General Manager Michael White.

Crescent City resident Katherine Naliboff was ready to criticize Elk Valley for not taking temperatures at the door and was surprised to learn the cameras did it automatically.

“Well that’s cool. I didn’t notice that,” Naliboff said, added it was nice to do something different at the casino. “I’ve been working through this whole thing. I haven’t taken any time off, just sticking to my normal life as much as possible. I probably wouldn’t have worn a mask, but I’m used to it since it’s required at work.”

The Lucky 7 has started with no smoking for now, and may phase it back in sooner, rather than later, according to general manager John Scott.

“We went with no smoking because you have to pull your mask off,” Scott explained. “That probably won’t last long. We’ll try it for a while. But we do have one of the larger no smoking gaming areas on the North Coast. I’m kind of proud of it. Put some new devices into it, so it’s kind of nice.”

Meanwhile, Elk Valley is allowing smoking and White is also proud of their new installation to – a Synexis special filtration system.

“It filters out microbials and airborne things. It was actually designed for the ebola virus couple years ago,” White said. “It’s pretty common in hospitals and really helps filters the air with a special cleaning agent. We’re not eradicating the virus, just mitigating it.”

Both casinos ran their reopening protocols past United Indian Health services, but did not need to get approval from the county.

“I’m not sure if they’re all in favor for the casinos opening up quite yet, but the tribe thought it was safe,” Scott said of the Tolowa Dee-ni’ Nation. “Being a sovereign nation, they didn’t need county approval to reopen. Technically we didn’t need to shut down. Just for the public view and the way things were going, it was better not to take too big a black eye.”

Both casinos have cut their occupancy by half. The Lucky 7 has turned off every other slot machine to ensure social distancing. Elk Valley has done the same, but has also installed pexiglass barriers between the more popular rows of machines.

And both locations will not have table games for now either.

“Table games stay closed a while yet until we figure it out,” Scott said. “We’ve seen models of how the Los Vegas strip is doing, they’re just spraying stuff. They’re not really dividing up tables, but there’s only three per table. Poker’s a little different. It’s a social game. You sit across from each other, doing you’re verbal jousting. That’s the game, it’s going to be a little more difficult there. You can’t really limit the number of seats. You going to have four? That’s a little boring.”

White and Scott agreed that staff at both locations were excited to be back at work. The Lucky 7 employs about 300 while the Elk Valley about 135.

“Biggest thing with the staff a lot of people are happy to be back. I talked to a lot of people over the last week, getting people revved up,” Scott said.

“A lot of the team has been training up for the last couple weeks,” White added. “It’s been really fun seeing everybody coming back. I’ve been in here by myself for a while.”

Director of Marketing Devin Jacot added the casino took extra steps to ensure the health of returning employees.

“One thing we last did Thursday was a free antibody check for all the staff voluntarily. It was quite the operation,” he said, thanking the six nurses from United Indian Health Services.

Scott said results from the tests are not back yet, but expects them back within a week.

Both casino’s restaurants seating capacity were reduced. Elk Valley’s Full House Bar & Grill will have a reduced seating capacity to allow minimum 10 feet of separation between tables, while the House of Howonquet Restaurant at Lucky 7 reduced its capacity from 150 to 80. Both will have limited menus.

Neither will be serving alcohol on the casino floor, although Lucky 7 will serve it in the restaurant. Scott explained the prohibition on alcohol.

“The bar is a social gathering point. With a bar, you got to have a lot of people, some excitement. That’s just not going to happen today,” he said.

Lucky 7 is holding off on bingo for now while Elk Valley is going with limited operations starting Thursday.

White said Elk Valley took advantage of the closure to replace all its carpeting throughout the casino, restaurant and poker room.

Finally, Scott said their hotel Honoquet Lodge will remained closed for now.

“Most of our customer base comes from Brookings and we’ve kind of been following their lead a little bit, with all the restaurants and sit-down dining, and hotels that are open,” Scott said. “But Crescent City is a little stricter, so we’ll follow that code of ethics for a while.”

While Elks Valley has postponed its promotions for now, Jacot remains hopeful their entertainment schedule will be revived.

“We have two very tentative concerts. We had the band Caravanserai, one of the top Santana tribute bands in the nation, in August and a tentative date for a Journey cover band in September,” Jacot said. “The roadblock is if there are no changes in public gatherings. The idea is this will help feel our way through the social distancing issue. Maybe concerts will come back.”

Both Scott and White agreed they've done all they can to make their casinos as safe as possible from the coronavirus. It just all comes down to personal preference.

"Come here to loosen up and have a couple laughs. People are so uptight anymore. I hope everybody wins today. The social distancing is fine. Prepared for the worst. But it all comes down to the customer. Whatever you feel safe with. If you don't feel safe, don't come here. We're going to try our best. That's all I can guarantee. You've got to feel confident in yourself."

Both casinos will close overnight, at midnight for Lucky 7 and 2 a.m. for Elk Valley, to do a comprehensive cleaning.

Check each casino's Facebook page for a complete list of social distancing guidelines they've taken.

"If you're comfortable and feel safe come on out, by all means we'd love to have you," White said. "But if you're not, stay home. It's okay."