

In sneak peek, casino rolls a winner

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PLAINS TWP. — As the sun set over the Susquehanna Tuesday night, more than 5,000 people took in Project Sunrise at Pocono Downs.

The new “permanent” 300,000-square-foot Mohegan Sun at Pocono Downs opened its doors for a sneak peek to a select few (thousand), offering food and drink samples, a chance to give the 2,500 slot machines a workout and the first glimpse of the region’s new crown jewel.

When visitors walk in the main entrance, the first thing they see is a 30-foot-tall sculpture created by The Baut Studios in Swoyersville. The artwork depicts coal and as your eyes gaze up toward the ceiling, the coal transforms into diamonds, the black nuggets’ shiny byproduct.

Those diamonds are about as flashy as things get. And that’s the way Mary Behler, of Palmerton, likes it. “It’s classy,” she said, while playing a nickel slot called “crazy diamonds.” She even praised the landscaping outside.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. “It’s very tastefully done. Not too glitzy.”

Those sentiments were echoed by dozens of others that were invited by the casino to break in the \$208 million complex that officially opens to the general public Thursday at 9:30 a.m. Traffic backed up out of the parking area into the evening and was bumper-to-bumper along Route 315 as hundreds of vehicles waited to make the turn into the parking area.

At 4 p.m., less than an hour before the doors opened, workers were still busy with some finishing touches: installing light bulbs, watering plants, checking trash cans, and preparing food.

Luzerne County Commissioner Maryanne Petrilla, state Sen. Lisa Baker, Lackawanna County Commissioner A.J. Munchak and the Rev. Thomas O’Hara, C.S.C., president of King’s College, were among those taking in the sights and sounds, including the wait-staff at Johnny Rockets singing some 1950s doo-wop and a band singing cover songs at Breakers, the complex’s nightclub.

The circular layout of the new structure makes it easy to navigate. A circular bar is in the center of the casino,

offering drinks, televisions airing sporting events and counter-top slot machines. Additional slot machines are located throughout the center of the complex and a high-stakes slots room is also available. A small section of the casino floor permits smoking and ATMs, and bill breakers are plentiful. The perimeter of the casino floor is lined with eateries and shops from the high-end Ruth’s Chris Steak House and Rustic Kitchen Bistro and Bar to the lower-cost offerings like the Hot Dog Hall of Fame and Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream.

If you pay close attention while walking around the perimeter you’ll notice what Mohegan Sun at Pocono Downs Vice President of Marketing Jim Wise calls “a celebration of Northeast Pennsylvania.”

The carpets are designed to represent the mountains and streams and even depict the state’s official fish, the brook trout. A light fixture is full of shadows shaped like the state’s official bird the ruffed grouse. The railings separating the slot machines from the walking loop are ornamented with the state’s official flower, the mountain laurel.

And the people of Northeast Pennsylvania took notice of the extra effort put in by the building’s designer.

Dan Bartle, of Nanticoke, played the Hot Hot Penny Slots and took a look around. “Very impressive,” he said, adding the project “has been a long time coming. This area needs stuff



Traffic lines up on Route 315 on Tuesday, the casino’s preview night.

like this. There’s some classy restaurants here.”

He added the complex has “everything Atlantic City has plus.”

Not everybody had high praise for the facility, which was 18 months in the making.

Linda Jones, of Dallas, said she preferred the Mohegan Sun casino in Uncasville, Conn., which is what she hoped the Plains Township rendition would be modeled after. While sampling a few menu items from the Wolfgang Puck Express, including the Shin Wah salad, she said the close drive, however, will likely entice her to return.

“It’s a lot easier than going to Connecticut,” she said.

From a state standpoint, Tuesday night served as a test run allowing state gaming board and security officials the chance to get a look at operations and make sure they’re running smoothly before giving the green light to Thursday’s planned public opening. From Mohegan Sun’s point of view, the night gave them a chance to wow a few thousand people and give the complex’s 1,200 employees a feel for what they’ll be up against.

While the state and Mohegan Sun both benefit in the long run from taxes and profits respectively, another group had a financial stake in a successful Tuesday night showing.

The United Way of the Wyoming Valley will receive nearly all of Mohegan Sun’s 40 percent take of the gambling revenue from the six-hour shindig. That amount was not released Tuesday night.