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Fledgling casino big on security

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Published Friday, Jan. 09, 2009

The recent arrest of a parolee on theft charges inside Red Hawk Casino offers some insight into the new gambling venue's strong in-house security system.

But an armed robbery Sunday on a nearby country road serves as a reminder that visitors are still vulnerable as criminals prowl for an easy score.

El Dorado County officials said only time will tell if the bright casino on the hill becomes a mecca for fun-lovers or a problem for local law enforcement.

Casino officials declined to answer questions about security measures to protect gamblers streaming up Highway 50 to Shingle Springs.

Red Hawk opened Dec. 17, drawing 10,000 gamblers on its first day. Since then sheriff's deputies and casino security have dealt with about a half-dozen calls for service, said Sgt. Bryan Golmitz, Sheriff's Department spokesman. The calls have included several thefts, a drunken driving arrest and a domestic dispute.

"A 15 to 17 percent increase in crime was forecast for the casino and the surrounding area," Golmitz said. "I don't think you can make a good prediction based on three weeks."

So far, Golmitz said, the Sheriff's Department is satisfied with the casino's security measures.

"Red Hawk Casino possesses state-of-the-art surveillance and security systems that are at the forefront of the industry," the casino's public relations firm said in a written statement. "Although we will not disclose details regarding these systems, our experienced security personnel will continue to take the appropriate measures and work collaboratively with the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department and other authorities to ensure a safe and enjoyable environment."

On Dec. 28, 48-year-old parolee John Gee of Fairfield allegedly stole a woman's purse containing \$1,000 in cash, numerous credit cards and a digital camera. The whole thing was caught on the casino's surveillance system.

Footage taken near the bank of slot machines where the woman had left the bag showed Gee as he walked away with it, according to a police report.

The footage showed Gee leave the casino and return a few minutes later. Guards took him into custody and called the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department. Deputies arrested him on suspicion of grand theft and violating parole.

On Sunday morning, a young man reported that he was robbed by three people while he was trying to fix his car near Strickland Mine and El Dorado roads. The car broke down not long after

the man and some friends left Red Hawk, sheriff's officials said.

The man had stayed with the car and tried to fix it while his friends found another ride.

He eventually flagged down another vehicle to ask for assistance. Its occupants slugged him, robbed him and threatened to shoot him, officials said.

El Dorado County sheriff's deputies, Folsom police and California Highway Patrol officers stopped the suspect vehicle on Highway 50 at Prairie City Road and arrested Kambarage Mayhand, 34, Fermin Avila, 33, and Catheryn Biesecker, 23, on suspicion of armed robbery.

The victim and all three of his alleged attackers are from the Sacramento area and probably would not have been in El Dorado County if not for the casino, sheriff's spokesman Golmitz said.

Both incidents may turn out to be typical reports stemming from the new casino, said Placer County Sheriff's Lt. Jeff Ausnow, who has worked with Thunder Valley Casino, off Highway 65 between Roseville and Lincoln.

"We have a partnership with Thunder Valley Casino where we share a concern for public safety," Ausnow said.

The outcome in El Dorado County may depend on how well local law enforcement develops a partnership with Red Hawk, Ausnow said.

Thunder Valley opened in June 2003. During its development, several community groups voiced concern about the casino attracting crime.

"We have not seen any major spike," Ausnow said. "That (concern) has not been supported through crime statistics."

El Dorado County Sheriff Jeff Neves predicted a spike in crime last spring as county officials prepared for Red Hawk's opening. His department is supposed to get \$500,000 a year for 20 years from the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians. But, that amount may not be enough to cover the costs of the increased law enforcement burden, Neves said.

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