

Pauma to Renovate Casino, Refinance Debt

By: Edward Sifuentes

Casino Pauma will have a new look thanks to a \$10 million renovation project expected to be completed this fall, according to the Pauma Band of Mission Indians, which owns the casino.

Tribe officials said Tuesday they had secured a \$66 million loan that will help fund the project. The loan will also help them refinance old debt.

Pauma opened its casino in Pauma Valley, on Highway 76 near Cole Grade Road, in 2001. While other nearby casinos have flourished, Pauma has tried to expand its operation, but partnerships with other casino operators have failed.

Casino Pauma, which is housed in a metal tent structure, is due for a renovation, officials said.

The project will include a new buffet restaurant, a new entrance, new lighting, carpeting and ceiling, officials said.

"We are really excited to see it come to fruition," said Pauma tribe secretary Bennae Calac.

Officials said the loan comes by way of Tribal Financial Advisors Inc., an independent investment bank that specializes in raising capital and providing financial advice to gaming tribes.

"This deal puts the tribe and casino in an excellent position to implement future plans as the economy continues to recover," said Verrin Kewenvoyouma, an attorney for the tribe.

Pauma Councilman Robert Quisquis said refinancing its old debt will help the tribe save millions of dollars in interest over the next several years.

Casino Pauma has about 1,000 slot machines, 20 table games and video poker and keno machines.

In 2004, the tribe renegotiated its gambling agreement with the state with an eye on expanding its operation to include a hotel and more slot machines. After several failed attempts at launching the expansion project, Pauma sued the state in 2009 to withdraw from the 2004 agreement.

Pauma planned to build a \$300 million casino and hotel with the help of its partners, the Mashantucket Pequots' Foxwoods Development Co. The project would include a casino with up to 2,500 slot machines and a 23-story hotel. But the project fell victim to the downturn in the economy.

In 2008, Pauma's project developer declared the project not feasible and canceled funding for it. The Connecticut tribe said at the time that it was unable to get the project financed because of the recession.