

Tribes look to prosperous '03

Gaming pact will bring in millions

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NORTHEAST VALLEY - While other Northeast Valley communities are struggling with supertight budgets, the Salt River Pima-Maricopa and Fort McDowell Yavapai tribes are starting 2003 on a high note.

November's voter approval of long-term Indian gambling agreements, including the addition of Nevada-style blackjack, is expected to bring millions of dollars to the tribes.

"It's going to play a major role in all our developments," Salt River President Joni Ramos said.

"The passage of (Proposition) 202 allows us to meet unmet needs that we've had for so many years."

It isn't a cure-all, said Raphael Bear, acting general manager for Fort McDowell.

"The economy affects us as well," Bear said. "Our biggest and only revenue source is the casino gambling."

Still, Northeast Valley tribes have other reasons to be excited about 2003.

Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation will spend the year celebrating its centennial, the official theme of which is: "We have struggled and succeeded for 100 years."

Festivities kicked off Friday with a special dinner, and activities are scheduled for every month, including a powwow in April and fireworks on Sept. 15, the tribe's official 100th anniversary.

- For the third year, the tribe sponsored the nationally televised Fiesta Bowl Parade on New Year's Eve.
- It is strongly considering building a hotel and RV park, Bear said, adding that a fine-dining steakhouse at the casino will open before the end of the month.
- The reservation's We-Ko-Pa Golf Club has been running ahead of budget since opening a year ago, Bear said.
"We were very surprised by the success," said Jeff Lessig, the club's general manager.

Salt River's new leader

At the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, tribal members are looking to a new leader for direction.



Joni Ramos leads the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community.

Ramos recently took the reins when she was inaugurated in December, making history as the first elected female president, succeeding Ivan Makil, the community's leader for 12 years.

Community member and landowner Herbert Chiago predicts that the new Ramos administration will bring sensitivity and fairness to the community.

Chiago actually ran against Ramos in the September election but said he is excited to see women in power.

"Indian women like to take care of their children and their people," Chiago said. "Not to say they can't argue as well."

Ramos has promised to focus her presidency on educating the young and caring for the elderly. The money generated from the tribe's two casinos is absolutely necessary to achieve a better quality of life for community members, she said.

With urban influences from Scottsdale and Mesa, Salt River struggles to strike a balance between economic development and maintaining traditions.

"Being so close to the cities is something we have to face on a day-to-day basis," Ramos said.

New facilities to open

The community is scheduled to open two new police and fire substations and its own high school during 2003.

The high school will offer students a curriculum focused on American Indian studies, language and traditions.

As for Salt River's development company, Devco, spokeswoman Claire Miller said Generation Seven, a 50-year plan for land use along Loop 101 between Mesa and Scottsdale, is still in draft form.

Other plans, meanwhile, are taking shape.

Miller expects groundbreaking for Phase 4 of the Chaparral Business Park during late summer, and another office-retail development between Chaparral and McDonald roads is in the last stages of approval, Miller said.