



People place their bets at Hollywood Casino in Bangor on Friday.

ASHLEY L. CONTI | BDN

The gaming gamble

Casino revenue up overall in 2015, but not in Bangor

BY NICK MCCREA
BDN STAFF

BANGOR — Maine set a new high-water mark in 2015 for casino revenue despite another small dip in business at the state's original gambling facility in Bangor.

Hollywood Casino brought in \$53.2 million in net revenue in 2015, a 2 percent decrease from the previous year, according to financial information provided to the Maine Gambling Control Board. It was the second straight year the Bangor casino's revenue declined. Its 2014 performance was slightly down from 2013, which was the first full year of operation for its only competitor in the state — Oxford Casino.

"We feel good about our performance last year," Hollywood Casino manager Jose Flores said last week. The casino was able to recover from a difficult first quarter, which Flores attributed to difficult travel conditions during a tough winter.

He said the casino continues to look for new entertainment opportunities, such as live music performances, to bring people in year round, and for new ways to reach out to

new customers.

"We're looking forward to a strong tourism year here in Eastern Maine, and will be continuing to strive for a quality entertainment experience for every customer that walks through our doors," Flores said.

The casino has tried to boost business in the past by extending its hours. Around the close of 2014, it experimented with a 24-hour operation, and didn't close the doors for 10 days. Results weren't what the casino hoped for, and it returned to a normal 19-hour day.

Hollywood Casino's latest revenue report comes in the midst of a dispute with the city over the valuation of its property. In October, casino officials filed an appeal with the Maine State Board of Property Tax Review, arguing the city overvalued its Main Street gaming properties and leases by \$61.98 million, more than half the venue's total assessed value.

"We will respect whatever decision is made throughout this process," Flores said last week. "But we do see it as independent from anything else we are doing at Hollywood Casino."

Meanwhile, Oxford Casino, about two

hours south off Interstate 95, has been open around-the-clock since mid-2013.

It fared better in 2015 than its competitor in Bangor. Oxford's revenue approached \$76.6 million, a 5 percent increase over the previous year.

"We have established ourselves as the southern Maine casino, as most of our customers come from that part of the state and have invested heavily in our marketing efforts throughout southern Maine," said Jane Hoyt, spokeswoman for the casino. "We are pleased with the performance thus far, as Oxford Casino continues to be an incredible economic engine for the region, creating both jobs and much needed revenue for local government and the state."

The combined performance of the casinos was good news for the state. Overall revenue of the two facilities hit \$129.8 million, a 2 percent increase over 2014. A portion of net casino revenue from both casinos helps support other entities. For example, 25 percent of net revenue at Oxford Casino goes to the Maine Department of Education. A percentage of Hollywood Casino's revenue goes to
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Bangor Savings increases wages

Bank establishes \$13 starting pay

BY DARREN FISHELL
BDN STAFF

PORTLAND — Bangor Savings Bank has set a wage floor of \$13 an hour for all employees, a move the bank said will give about one-third of its employees a raise.

The bank's "living wage initiative" means 240 of the bank's 740 employees will get a raise, according to Carol Colson, a senior vice president at the bank. The bank said it has increased its entry-level pay over the past two years, putting the \$13-an-hour rate into effect this year.

That starting wage works out to \$520 per week for a full-time employee. Across all jobs in commercial banking, the average weekly wage was \$1,038, according to figures compiled by the Maine Department of Labor.



Protect yourself against tax scams

BY RUSS VAN ARSDALE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR NORTHEAST CONTACT

Federal officials have termed them the biggest scams ever. Together, they cost consumers billions of dollars every year. And they use people's fear of the Internal Revenue Service as a weapon.

The first starts with an unexpected phone call. You're told that you owe taxes and must pay immediately or you'll be jailed. What do you do?

An IRS official says, just hang up ... it's a scam.

Hundreds of thousands of consumers have received multiple calls from different people, all posing as either IRS officials or law enforcement agents. All the callers claim that legal action is certain, unless they receive money via wire right away. A demand for immediate payment is the second tipoff that it's a hoax.

The first was the threat of imprisonment.

The IRS does not typically call a taxpayer; the agency begins by sending a letter. It also does not seek payment by way of prepaid cards, and it does not have agents standing by with arrest warrants in case the taxpayer hesitates.

The criminals who use these techniques can be abusive, even threatening to hurt their victims. These hoax calls may originate halfway around the world — although a spoofed phone number may make them appear nearby — and any threatened action rarely happens.

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CONSUMER FORUM

Potato Board invests in food truck craze

BY ANTHONY BRINO
BDN STAFF

CARIBOU — Americans are eating fewer fresh potatoes than their parents and grandparents. But Van Buren farmer Jay Lajoie thinks that a new generation of eaters will soon see the spud as tasty, wholesome and a great pairing with pretty much anything.

The U.S. Potato Board is in the early stages of an ambitious campaign to reintroduce fresh preparations of the potato and counter its image as a starchy, fried junk food, Lajoie told his fellow farmers at the Maine Potato Conference in Caribou Jan. 20.

This year, the U.S. Potato Board is expanding its new Spud Nation food trucks from Denver to the East Coast — as the first agriculture advertising campaign "that will actually pay for itself," said Lajoie, who worked on the board's industry committee.

"This is one heck of a food truck," Lajoie said, describing the \$160,000 kitchen and its feature

dishes, including classic fries, Italian gnocchi and Cuban braised beef with corn-potato croquettes.

Unlike a billboard, the mobile food truck "can actually target consumers, feed them with a delicious meal, and they pay you for you advertising to them," Lajoie said.

The U.S. Potato Board is aiming to have 500 Spud Nation trucks in cities across the country, clearly going after the young adults who've embraced food trucks and "fast casual" eating. The board also is running a campaign called "Raise the Bar," aiming to get 3,000 salad bars, featuring potatoes and other vegetables, into schools across the country.

This program, Lajoie said, is trying "to target Generation Z," the 60 million school-age American kids who were born after millennials.

"Having potatoes on the salad bars allows people to realize that potatoes are actually a vegetable and are part of a well-balanced



US POTATO BOARD

A Spud Nation food truck shown at the Potato Expo in Las Vegas. Farmer Jay Lajoie of Van Buren thinks the potato board-backed food truck initiative would be a good opportunity for a Maine entrepreneur.

diet," said Lajoie, whose family farm sells potatoes, grains and other root vegetables to both chip makers and the fresh market.

Both the food truck and salad bar are part of the potato industry's decade-long effort to keep the market for fresh potatoes afloat — and ideally expand it.

While fresh and processed potato consumption around the world

is strong, Americans are eating about 20 percent fewer fresh potatoes than they were in the 1970s, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service. In Maine, potato production has fallen from its peak in the late 1940s, when some 5 billion pounds per year were harvested from more than 200,000
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