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## The Laconia Daily Sun

### Now known as Lakes Region Casino, Belmont biz has new focus on charitable gaming & live entertainment

By Adam Drapcho  
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BELMONT — Lakes Region Casino, the business previously known as The Lodge at Belmont, is expecting big things from 2012, according to general manager Rick Newman.

Principal among Newman's reasons for optimism is the new owner of the facility, Craig Potts, an Arizona-based businessman who owns several other gaming sites around North America. He also owns Potts Racing, an off-road racing company with Jesse James as one of its drivers.

The 35,000-square-foot facility on Route 107 was built in 1975 as a seasonal dog track, said Newman. Under the new ownership, he said the business is striking out in a new direction, leaving dog racing behind and focusing instead on the growth of charitable gaming and live musical entertainment.

With the change in strategy comes a new identity, leaving behind "The Lodge at Belmont" and assuming "Lakes Region Casino."

Newman is in his third year as general manager of the facility and has lobbied the state Legislature on the business's behalf since 1994. Live greyhound racing was held there until 2008, he said. In 1992, The Lodge also began simulcasting, staying open year-round and allowing patrons to watch and bet on races taking place elsewhere, though they stopped that practice in November, 2010.

Previous ownership, the Torguson Gaming Group, was looking to find a way to bring back simulcasting. However, under Potts, Newman said the business is making a clean break from racing. "We took a step back and said, let's look at other things."

"We've got to find new ways to get people in within the constraints of the law," said Newman. This year, he's planning to find ways to grow charity gambling, open a "family entertainment center" and greatly expand the Casino's ability to host live entertainment.

Charity gambling has been a part of the business's operation since 2006. By sponsoring gaming nights, non-profit organizations are eligible to receive 35-percent of the gross revenue generated by table games, such as blackjack, craps or roulette. Last year, he said, charities received about \$350,000 through table games at the casino. Newman would like to add electronic table games to the table gaming room — which he calls "the pit" — believing that some players would be more comfortable playing with a machine rather than sitting down at a table full of veteran gamblers.

Adjacent to the "pit" is a room that looks out over the track that dogs ran on for many years. In that room, the Lakes Region Casino plans to create a "family entertainment center," a term defined in RSA 647 as a place of business with 50 or more games or devices for entertainment purposes, of which no more than 15 percent may be "redemption poker machines" or "redemption slot machines." These machines would be games of chance, with winners paid in tickets which they could redeem for various merchandise. Newman plans to place about 100 total machines in the "family entertainment center," which the business will name "Room 647" in honor of the law which enables the practice.



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The third leg of the revised business plan is live musical entertainment. Previous owners created a small performance space inside the facility's bar, which could hold about 135 people. Newman said the Lakes Region Casino has already added an indoor stage in Room 647, where about 300 people can watch a performance. Local country group The Eric Grant Band has already packed the place twice.

In addition to the indoor venues, Lakes Region Casino will construct an outdoor stage in the spring. The open-air venue, located in the infield of the former dog racing track, could hold up to 5,000 people, said Newman, bringing the capacity to something within range of Meadowbrook in Gilford. However, Newman doesn't envision his business in competition with the more established Meadowbrook.

"I don't see us competing with Meadowbrook, I see us in between," he said, identifying a lack of venues that are bigger than a typical bar but smaller than Meadowbrook. "There's plenty of talent that can't sell out Meadowbrook, but could sell 1,000 or 1,500 tickets." Newman imagines drawing the same type of acts that perform at the Hampton Beach Casino Ballroom.

One final thing for Newman to look forward to this year is the Potts Racing element. He's not sure how, yet, but Newman said Craig Potts would like to inject some off-road racing flavor to Lakes Region Casino. The site has hosted a local rallycross event in its large parking lot. Newman and Potts are considering their options, which, with more than 200 acres of woods at their disposal, are plentiful.

The business hasn't been profitable for a couple of years, said Newman. He and the other 44 employees of Lakes Region Casino are hoping the new vision for the operation will reverse that recent trend. "Craig Potts is committed to making it profitable, and to making the investments to make it work," Newman said.

CAPTION for LAKES REGION CASINO in AA:

Rick Newman, general manager of Lakes Region Casino, is shown here in "the pit." Formerly known as The Lodge at Belmont, the business plans to take a new direction this year. (Laconia Daily Sun photo/Adam Drapcho)