

Valley River Casino Announces \$275 Million Expansion

Written by: Jonah Lossiah
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Vanderweil is collaborating with project architect, JCJ Architecture, to deliver MEP/FP engineering design services.

MURPHY – Just one day after celebrating the seventh anniversary of the Harrah's Cherokee Valley River Casino & Hotel, leaders broke ground on a \$275 million expansion project that will evolve the property.



Leaders of the EBCI and Harrah's Cherokee Valley River broke ground on the new expansion on Thursday, Sept. 29. Pictured from left to right: TCGE Chair Tommy Lambert, Principal Chief Richard G. Sneed, Tribal Council Chairperson Richard French, Vice Chief Alan B. Ensley, Valley River Casino General Manager Lumpy Lambert, and Harrah's Cherokee General Manager Brooks Robinson. (JONAH LOSSIAH/One Feather photo)

This project will more than double the constructed space of the casino. The existing buildings encompass 311,011 square feet, and the new construction will add 315,158 square feet. The additions include new gaming space, hotel tower, rooftop restaurant, spa, and a parking deck. Whiting-Turner Construction Company have been selected as the contractor for this project.

Lumpy Lambert, general manager of Harrah's Cherokee Valley River, said that they have been working on this design for years.

"We've been working on a master plan since about 2018. We engaged with the design team, JCJ Architecture, to really look at a master plan for this property. But we really had limited funding. So, we just kind of did it in a sequence. The project in Cherokee with the fourth tower and convention center came about, so JCJ redirected up there and started helping the team there with that project," said Lambert.

He said that work never fully stopped on their end, but they had to be patient until the timing was right.

"We put our master planning on pause for a year to 18 months or so. At the same time, we're working in the background just trying to develop and quantify the amenities and the programming that we felt was necessary for this property."

Lambert said that they needed to go before Tribal Council for approval of this expansion deal, but that the Tribe is not directly contributing to the funding.

"The Tribe's not on the hook for any of the loan. The TCGE is who the loan would be assigned to through the banks. It's just an accumulation of what we anticipated we needed. 275 million dollars is that cap amount."

This expansion will be a significant upgrade for the Valley River Casino. The cost of the original base campus was \$110 million. The budget for this project is more than double that and looks to greatly increase the amenities available to guests.



The gaming space will see a 23,359-square-foot addition, and along with it there will be 400 new slot machines, 12 table games, a 10-table World Series of Poker room, new bar, and a motorcoach lobby.

The hotel tower will add 296 rooms, effectively doubling the lodging at the casino. These new accommodations will include an indoor pool, fitness center, expanded hotel Porte-cochere with valet service, expanded lobby, and a 20,000-square-foot multipurpose room for meetings, events, and exhibitions.

Lambert said that one of the most exciting additions will be the dining space. This will be a 12,000-square-foot restaurant that will offer breakfast, lunch, and dinner. "One of the key things was the roof-top restaurant. We

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think that's going to be a huge draw. Because there's no one in Atlanta, no one in the Chattanooga market that has that three-meal restaurant where you can basically have 250 indoor dining seats, 20 at a bar, and 30 at a terrace setting overlooking some really fabulous views of mountain ranges."

For a more luxurious amenity, Valley River will now have its own full-service spa and salon as well. This 9,600-square-foot facility will have six treatment rooms, a sauna, steam room, plunge pool, and a relaxation room.

The new parking deck will add 1,700 spaces available to visitors. The deck will also house six charging stations for electric vehicles. A covered sky bridge will connect the deck to the other buildings at the casino.



This is the second expansion project that has occurred at the Valley River Casino, with the first being a much smaller price of around 13 to 15 million dollars, according to Lambert.

"We had a small expansion in 2017 where we added the bowling center, a sit-down restaurant, and a casino bar that is now inside of our sports book. Those three amenities have been tremendous for this property," said Lambert. He said that timing was so important when delivering this expansion. He said that there were amenities that could not feasibly be part of the original build that was completed back in 2015.

"We were constrained on funding initially. We had a 110-million-dollar project. A lot of the amenities and a lot of the programming needed to be left out of that. So, it was really an opportunity for us. We paid the property off within

five years, so we knew there was an opportunity with the success of the property. The timing was good as we started the exercise. Obviously, we didn't anticipate or know what the outcome was going to be with some of the recent economic conditions that are occurring."

As the property has grown and paid off the original price tag, confidence in the business model has also grown. Lambert said that they have learned how Valley River can work symbiotically with the Resort on the Qualla Boundary.

"There's always the risk of cannibalization and risk of losing some revenue at one because of the location of another. But really, that has never transpired. There was some of that concern initially because of the proximity of this property to the Atlanta market. It only being two hours from downtown Atlanta. But it really hasn't affected the travel and frequency of visits from guests in the Atlanta market to Cherokee. Because anybody on the 85 side goes to Cherokee, and anybody on the 75 side of Atlanta comes to Valley River."

Lambert said that watching how the Resort has grown has been beneficial to Valley River. They have been able to observe the best additions and emulate those with the expansion.

"Basically, what we wanted to do with this expansion is provide some of the amenities that we know have been successful at the Resort. Some of those include more dining options, some of those include a spa and an indoor pool. Little things that make a big difference in the overall guest experience."

The breakdown of the project is set at \$215 million for construction; \$12 million for design; \$10 million for furniture, fixtures, and equipment; \$6 million for IT systems; and the remaining \$32 million for 'soft costs' to complete the project.

The current plan has completion of the project in approximately 18 months, which would slate a ribbon-cutting in early 2024. The Cherokee One Feather will follow expansion as it develops and provide any major updates to the project.