



Rocky Gap

CASINO • RESORT

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Photography by: **Lance C. Bell**



Photo courtesy Rocky Gap Casino Resort



Among the many attractions at Rocky Gap Casino Resort are the new gaming floor (top photo) and the Jack Nicklaus Signature Public Golf Course (bottom photo).

Wanda Holtschneider, director of marketing for Rocky Gap Casino Resort, recently stated, “Our guests are arriving for gaming, golfing, dining, live entertainment, and to enjoy Rocky Gap State Park. We work with local officials and businesses so that our guests are also introduced to nearby attractions and events. Rocky Gap Casino Resort is committed to partnering with local businesses and officials to provide a positive experience for visitors at our facility and to Western Maryland.”

According to Wanda, the casino’s successful grand opening on May 22, 2013, marked the culmination of combined efforts on the part of the resort management team and local officials. Cooperation between government officials and private developers have a long history at Rocky Gap and stretch back to the days when a state park near

Flintstone, Maryland, was only a vision. The recent opening of Rocky Gap Casino Resort provides an opportunity to reflect on the collaboration that made the state park, golf course, lodge, and casino a reality over more than six decades of time. The story begins when Dwight Eisenhower was president, gasoline cost 18 cents a gallon, and United States Route 40 was the major East-West route through Allegany County.

Credit for suggesting that a state park be built in Allegany County belongs to the local Lions Club. The organization’s idea was presented to State Senator Charles See who took the necessary formal steps that began a long planning process at the local and state levels.

Subsequently, in 1950 the Maryland State Planning Commission authorized a recreational survey of Western Maryland, a study that set in motion a series of additional recommendations that eventually led to the establishment of a state park located seven miles east of Cumberland. The park was envisioned as a tourist destination and economic benefit for Western Maryland residents.

Senator See’s formal steps were quickly supported by Edward Habeeb, Allegany County resident, and a volunteer group known as the Route 40 Association. The volunteers recognized the economic benefits that improved highways and recreational facilities would bring to the region. Mr. Habeeb proved to be a dynamic personality in promoting the establishment of a park and increased interstate highway funding for Western Maryland. Not content with offering



Maryland Governor Millard Tawes cut the ribbon for the grand opening of the Cumberland crosstown bridge on December 3, 1966. Governor Tawes also formally broke ground for Rocky Gap State Park the same day. The Route 40 Association was a volunteer group that lobbied for both Rocky Gap State Park and interstate highway funding for Western Maryland. Also present at the ribbon cutting ceremony were Cumberland residents, Francis Kenney, Maryland State Roads official (second from the left) and Judge Thomas Finan (fifth from left, white coat). *Photo courtesy Dan Whetzel.*

vocal support, he also donated land to the state for the recreational facility. Forty additional land owners also offered land; some were compensated for their property.

In 1963, the state acquired McLuckie's Clover Hill dairy farm, a large area that included the present day entrance and parking areas to the state park. The McLuckie barn, emblazoned with "Clover Hill" above the front doors, remained a local landmark until it was demolished in 1988.

Following additional land acquisitions, Governor Millard Tawes formally broke ground for the 3,000 acre Rocky Gap State Park in December 1966.

An important feature of the park was the creation of Lake Habeeb, located at the base of Evitt's Mountain. In 1970, the Army Corps of Engineers completed the dam which allowed the 243 acre impoundment to reach its capacity. Construction on the remainder of the park continued

until July 17, 1974, when the Rocky Gap State Park formally opened to the public under the authority of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources.

The park offered hiking, boating, fishing, picnicking, and other outdoor nature experiences in a low density environment. Local officials immediately sought to capitalize on the success of the park by planning additional facilities that would attract more visitors and possibly new businesses. The two most frequently discussed facilities were a conference center and public golf course.

In 1979, officials discussed the possibilities of establishing a state-private sector partnership for the purpose of building a conference center and golf course adjacent to Rocky Gap State Park. Four years later the discussions led to the formation of a 15 member state task force; the group's charge was to examine the feasibility of a resort-convention center in Western Maryland.

Over the next decade various plans for the resort and golf course were discussed. While individual proposals differed, most discussions focused on collaborative efforts between the state government and private developers. An enhanced Rocky Gap State Park was promoted by advocates as an economic boost for Western Maryland, a region that was experiencing a high rate of unemployment.



Jack Nicklaus driving a few balls on the newly constructed Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course at Rocky Gap State Park, May 17, 2001. Photo courtesy Albert L. Feldstein.

Through the support of local and state officials, including Governors Schaefer and Glendenning, the Rocky Gap lodge and golf course moved from discussions to reality in May 1996 when funding was approved for the resort complex.

The 54 million dollar lodge including public golf course and conference center was financed by private bond sales, state bonds, grants or loans, and Allegany County funds. The Maryland Economic Development Commission (MEDCO) was instrumental in organizing and promoting the initiative. With the financial package in place, Governor Glendenning presided over groundbreaking ceremonies on May 20, 1996, nearly three decades after a similar ceremony conducted by Governor Tawes marked the formal start of Rocky Gap State Park. While both Rocky Gap State Park and adjacent lodge were owned by the state, operations remained separate. The state park remained under the authority of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources while management of the lodge was leased to several private companies over the years.

Two years of construction were required to build the six story, 220 room luxury lodge and suites center that formally opened on April 17, 1998. The accompanying Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course, the only one in Maryland, followed three years later with formal ceremonies being held on May 17, 2001.

The most recent phase of development at the site began in August 2012 when Rocky Gap Golf and Lodge Resort

was purchased by Evitt's Resort LLC, a subsidiary of Lakes Entertainment Inc. The deal set in motion a series of events that made Rocky Gap Casino Resort the fourth casino to open in Maryland.

After six months of planning and construction, the lodge interior was transformed by converting the former meeting rooms into a gaming floor with more than 500 slot machines, 10 gaming tables, a casino-center bar, and a stage for live entertainment. Guest rooms and the lobby were also upgraded to create a fresh look. Care was taken to maintain the rustic ambiance of the original lodge.

Long time visitors to Rocky Gap will immediately take note of the expanded amenities, particularly free valet parking. Scott Just, general manager of the new casino resort, recently summarized the enhancements, "We designed the gaming room with earth-toned colors, so it feels comfortable and open. Visitors will notice the refurbished lobby hosts "A Little Munch" snack bar and additional seating. On the first floor, the original *Lakeside Restaurant* was partitioned and now offers guests a themed buffet that includes Asian, Mexican, Italian, and All-American menus on consecutive week nights, and a surf & turf buffet on weekends."

Adjacent to the *Lakeside Restaurant* is the new *Burger and Lounge*; an extended deck overlooking Lake Habeeb and



Rocky Gap State Park is nestled in the beautiful Appalachian Mountains of Western Maryland and situated on scenic Lake Habeeb just off Interstate 68, Exit 50.

a wine menu are its two most popular attractions. Located near the Golf Pro Shop is the *Signatures Bar & Grill* that displays a giant HD television screen and additional smaller screens for sports fans. A Sunday National Football League (NFL) package will be offered in the fall.

A new meeting room is currently under construction and has a projected opening date of November 2013. According to Scott, “We are developing ideas for the new room that include floor shows, banquets, business meetings, concerts, and other events. Adjacent to the meeting center will be smaller rooms. The nearby fitness center, health spa, and indoor swimming pool are currently being upgraded.”

The most obvious new attraction at Rocky Gap Casino Resort is the gaming floor where a variety of slot machines and related attractions have drawn guests from around the region. The table games include Blackjack, Mississippi Stud Poker, Three Card Poker, Roulette, and Craps. Slot machines include Wheel of Fortune, Aladdin, Wizard of Oz, Ruby Slippers and Monopoly. According to Scott, “The variety of games means we have something for everyone from beginner to more experienced players. We also have gaming guides and employees to assist beginners.”

The digital age is evident on the gaming floor. Images of players inserting coins into one-armed bandits no longer apply to contemporary gaming. Instead of coins or tokens, players insert small cards that interface with the digital terminals. Money or points are digitally added and subtracted, according to results of the game. After finishing the game, players receive a cash-out voucher that may be converted to currency at ATM machines or the casino window. All games are approved by the Maryland Lottery and Gaming Control Agency and are connected to a state accounting system.



Gaming has become a major source of revenue for state governments across the country and Maryland. According to official reports, state approved gambling revenues totaled nearly 1.8 billion dollars last year and local governments benefited by sharing in the profits. Approximately 556 million dollars was returned to the state by the gaming industry. The state distributed those funds to education, public safety, and other programs. Allegany County will receive 5.5% of the profits generated at the local casino.

Economic considerations were a primary reason local officials favored the establishment of a casino at Rocky Gap. Construction jobs provided an initial boost to employment, while the subsequent hiring of staff is an ongoing benefit to the local economy. Approximately 90% of the staff is from Allegany County and surrounding areas.



Scott emphasized that Evitt's Resorts LLC is committed to establishing a profitable enterprise in Allegany County. "What we are doing positively affects economic development in Allegany County. We now employ 350 full time workers and 200 seasonal workers and have exhausted the local supply of labor. Anyone who wants to work should be able to find a job. We are still accepting applications and hiring workers."

The possibility of hiring local workers received a boost when Allegany College of Maryland offered a 12 week course in the skill of card dealing. Approximately 100 students enrolled in the program, thereby capitalizing on yet another partnership between the private and public sectors.

The casino's opening impacted the occupancy rate at the lodge. According to Scott, prior to Evitt's ownership the occupancy rate operated in the 40% range. In the time period since the grand opening, the occupancy rate has risen to 90%.

The Rocky Gap Casino's success will also have a positive effect on government revenue. "As we continue to grow, Allegany County and the state of Maryland will share in the profits that we generate at Rocky Gap Casino Resort," stated Scott.

Several beaches, ample picnic sites and pavilions provide fun and relaxation for many. Fishing and boating are popular on the lake, although only electric powered motors are allowed. Gasoline powered motors are prohibited.

Rocky Gap State Park is recognized as a positive factor in the casino's ability to attract visitors and a reason to continue informal ties that have existed between the park and resort. "We have a harmonious relationship with the park and work on an ongoing basis to coordinate activities and events at both locations. The state park is an added family attraction for our guests. We are also working directly with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources to implement a tree planting program and build a children's playground in the park," stated Scott.

The partnership that has existed between the state and private sectors at Rocky Gap will continue to grow in the future. "We own our casino, have signed a 40 year lease on the land, and look forward to sharing our success with the local community. We are committed to being an important partner in the economic growth of Allegany County."

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