



The attraction in the Ohio city's downtown still carries the old moniker

In an interview with The Cincinnati Enquirer this past week, Hard Rock Cincinnati Casino President George Goldhoff shed some light on when the iconic guitar logo may finally go up in the home of funk master Bootsy Collins.

As you might expect, the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc with the company's plans.

Given that we have been operating without an official brand, and without the 70,000 people typically downtown pre-COVID to provide foot traffic to our casino, I am optimistic about introducing Hard Rock to Cincinnati next year once the pandemic is in our rearview mirror," he told the paper.

The casino's closure in the spring might have been an ideal time to make cosmetic branding changes inside the casino. But the statewide shutdown also kept Hard Rock's contractors from being able to work as well, he said.

Goldhoff also told the paper there was a question about where to place resources. The company chose to allocate those resources toward maintaining benefits for their employees.

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And while Ohio casinos have not closed for a second time, as they did in other states, they remain under a curfew ordered in November by Gov. Mike DeWine. That means the venue must shut down at 10 pm ET through at least next Sunday, Jan. 2.

The restricted hours, plus limitations on capacity, have kept Hard Rock from bringing back its entire staff of 950. Currently, the casino has about 400 workers, Goldhoff said.

"Behind the Scenes" Work Underway

Hard Rock agreed to buy the Cincinnati casino from JACK Entertainment in April 2019. At the time, JACK was looking to scale down its gaming operations. It previously sold the Greektown Casino Hotel in Detroit to Penn National Gaming for \$1 billion in November 2018.

JACK still maintains a casino in downtown Cleveland and a racino in the northern Ohio city's suburbs.

Goldhoff told The Enquirer some “behind the scenes” work has started. That includes unveiling new uniforms for employees, switching computer systems, and unveiling the company’s loyalty rewards program.

Other moves are in the planning stages.

“Our new Hard Rock look and feel will be vibrant and in typical Hard Rock style, with cool and unique museum quality memorabilia around the property, creating Hard Rock Moments for visitors and players alike,” Goldhoff said.

Under the Hard Rock deal to buy the JACK casino, Vici Properties purchased the 22-acre property and leases it to the gaming company. The total purchase price was \$745 million.

Hard Rock Faces Competition

At one point, Hard Rock was vying for a larger share of the gaming business in the Cincinnati market.

As part of the initial deal to buy the Cincinnati casino, Hard Rock was also going to buy Turfway Park, a racetrack in nearby Erlanger, Ky. However, before the deal could close, Churchill Downs Inc. announced plans to seek Turfway’s racing dates and build its own track nearby.

Eventually, Churchill Downs agreed to buy the existing track for \$46 million. The Louisville-based gaming company is in the midst of a \$100 million upheaval of the 61-year-old venue.

In October, Churchill opened a historical horse racing parlor in Newport, directly across the Ohio River from downtown Cincinnati. The Kentucky Horse Racing Commission approved Churchill’s move to help it generate revenue for racing purses.

Churchill Downs also plans to offer HHR machines at Turfway. For now, though, the old grandstand has been demolished, as workers build a new venue. Besides new seating for fans, the plans call for up to 1,500 of the slot-like machines at the track.

Goldhoff told the Enquirer that Hard Rock offers quite a different atmosphere than Churchill’s Newport parlor.

“We are a full-service casino specializing in creating non-gaming experiences, with amenities such as specialty concept restaurants, live entertainment, museum-quality memorabilia, and unique service delivery,” he said.

Besides the HHR machines, Hard Rock also faces competition from three Indiana casinos and three racinos in southwestern Ohio.