

Hard Rock plotting new tower

by Kirby Lee Davis

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TULSA – The Hard Rock Hotel & Casino will raise a new tower where February snow caved in its roof.

At 10 a.m. Tuesday, Cherokee Nation Entertainment CEO David Stewart will join with Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Bill John Baker to break ground for a third tower at the tribe's flagship Catoosa complex. Cherokee officials said this addition would make the Hard Rock the region's largest resort and entertainment destination.

"What you're trying to do from a competitive standpoint is to keep people at your property as long as you can," said Tulsa hospitality industry analyst Mike Craddock. "If you're able to provide multiple elements, you're able to increase your chances at obtaining those dollars."

The Cherokees released few construction details ahead of Tuesday's event. Friday's announcement said the CNE project, to be completed next year, would add 100 hotel rooms to its Catoosa operation, boosting the Hard Rock's 350-room lodging capacity by 28 percent.

That would make it Tulsa's second-largest full-service hotel, following the Hyatt Regency Tulsa's 460 rooms, according to the Journal Record 2011 Book of Lists.

Positioned to refill an area damaged by heavy snows last winter, the new tower also will have more than 55,000 square feet of entertainment and gaming space. The property's \$155 million expansion completed in August 2009 raised its total gaming space to more than 125,000 square feet.

It's unknown how these changes may affect Hard Rock's convention business. With 40,000 square feet of banquet facilities, the Hard Rock ranks third in the Tulsa area behind the 50,000 square feet at the Tulsa Renaissance Hotel and 43,000 square feet at the Tulsa Marriott Southern Hills.

Those figures do not include The Joint, the 2,700-square-foot performance hall at the Hard Rock, which may be used for speeches or large group presentations. Opened in September 2010, that \$20 million venue was the last major addition to the Cherokee complex.

Other features expected with the new tower range from a media bar and lounge to an interactive, multiplayer gaming zone. Those would align with the Hard Rock's existing entertainment mix that includes not just casino gaming, performance stages and convention space, but also multiple restaurants, including Toby Keith's I Love This Bar & Grill and a 19th-floor McGill's steakhouse, plus an art gallery, jewelry store, clothing store, and golf course.

"That area has done phenomenally well with the onslaught of the casino and The Joint," said Craddock, the Tulsa vice president for the Oklahoma City hospitality brokerage HotelBrokerOne. "The market out there has become fairly strong and my understanding is the other hotels there are doing quite well."

With the Interstate 44 and Creek/Will Rogers Turnpike intersection complete, Catoosa has added a Hampton Inn, with a La Quinta under construction.

"That market out there has become fairly strong," said Craddock. "The Cherokees understand their market. They understand it's always good to have a full complement of services to bring people in. It's very much a Las Vegas-style entertainment area. The gaming, the entertainment, the rooms. ... They've got high-class everything."