

Two years in, ilani owners still have a winning hand

Gaming, entertainment facility evolves by fine-tuning details, adding new features



(https://pcdn.columbian.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/1004212024-ilani_01.jpg)

Alisha Alexander, left, and her mother, Lisa Lugar, right, both of Ridgefield, play the new Willy Wonka World of Wonka slot machine at ilani. Lugar said she and her daughter have come to enjoy "Forever Young Mondays," where guests 50 years and older receive special perks. Wednesday marks ilani's two-year anniversary. Photos by Alisha Jucevic/The Columbian



(<https://pcdn.columbian.com/wp-content>)

Alisha Alexander, left, and her mother, Lisa Lugar, right, both of Ridgefield, play the new Willy Wonka World of Wonka slot machine at ilani. Lugar said she and her daughter have come to enjoy "Forever Young Mondays," where guests 50 years and older receive special perks. Wednesday marks ilani's two-year anniversary. Photos by Alisha Jucevic/The Columbian

By **Allan Brettman** ([/author/a_brettman](#)), Columbian Business Editor and **Anthony Macuk** ([/author/amacuk](#)),

Columbian business reporter

Published: April 21, 2019, 6:05 AM

4

COWLITZ INDIAN RESERVATION — Most of the same sights and sounds greet an ilani visitor today as they did two years ago, when the casino and resort opened 17 miles north of downtown Vancouver.



The 100,000-square-foot gaming floor is lit just as brilliantly on a cloudy spring day, and the low-level hum of intense gamblers pervades the place. Food and drink options are still just steps away.

But its leaders say ilani has changed in those 24 months, recalibrating its approach to better serve customers while adding features both large and small to attract first-time visitors. More change is on the way.



(<https://pcdn.columbian.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/04-21-ilani-casino-pdf-520x1024.jpg>)

Related stories

- [Clark County to sort out how to apportion tribe payments:](https://www.columbian.com/news/2019/apr/21/clark-county-to-sort-out-how-to-apportion-tribe-payments/) (<https://www.columbian.com/news/2019/apr/21/clark-county-to-sort-out-how-to-apportion-tribe-payments/>) Agreement moved to back burner after turnover on council
- [Two years in, ilani owners still have a winning hand:](https://www.columbian.com/news/2019/apr/21/two-years-in-ilani-owners-still-have-a-winning-hand/) (<https://www.columbian.com/news/2019/apr/21/two-years-in-ilani-owners-still-have-a-winning-hand/>) Gaming, entertainment facility evolves by fine-tuning details, adding new features

On Monday, casino officials and Cowlitz Indian Tribe leaders will gather to commemorate the latest building to be constructed on the tribe's 156-acre reservation between Ridgefield and La Center, and to announce another planned development. At the same time, master planning continues on a broader vision that could one day include a hotel, tribal headquarters, a cultural center and other capital improvements.

It almost makes the battle that led to the casino a distant memory. The project's development dates back to the early 2000s, when the tribe received formal recognition from the federal government and began to seek land near Exit 16 of Interstate 5 to establish a reservation.

The Cowlitz sought to build a casino as a revenue source, and formed a financial partnership with the Mohegan Tribe of Connecticut, owners of several gaming and entertainment ventures, including the massive Mohegan Sun casino in Uncasville, Conn.

The proposal faced a lawsuit from Clark County, the city of Vancouver, cardroom owners in La Center and groups of local residents and business owners, as well as the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, which operate the Spirit Mountain Casino 60 miles southwest of Portland.

The owners of ilani broke ground in February 2016, starting work on both the \$510 million casino and a \$32 million rebuild of the nearby Exit 16 interchange. Some of the plaintiffs dropped out of a lawsuit later that year, and the U.S. Supreme Court dismissed a final appeal from the remainder on April 3, 2017, three weeks before ilani's grand opening.

Despite the turbulent beginning, the casino has met its owners' expectations in the first two years, according to its president and general manager. With the legal battle now behind them, casino management is focusing on internal growth, customer service and being a good neighbor.

Hitting milestones

The Mohegan Tribal Gaming Authority, now named Mohegan Gaming & Entertainment, named Kara Fox-LaRose as the president and general manager of ilani in early 2016. She had worked 22 years in the casino and hospitality industry, most of it at the Mohegan Sun and the Mohegan Sun Pocono in Pennsylvania.

Fox-LaRose, a Mohegan Tribe member, acknowledged in an interview that she arrived at a time of tumult for ilani. That's because the governments of Clark County and Vancouver had only recently dropped their legal challenge to the Cowlitz Tribe's right to establish a casino.

Things have headed in a different direction on two significant fronts since then, she said.

The casino wants to be a good citizen, she said, pointing to partnerships with area hotels to steer meeting business, as well as cooperation with area governments.

"We don't see ourselves as the only destination in the region," Fox-LaRose said. "We see ourselves as an amenity to the region. So we're working with regional businesses and business leaders to create interest for Clark County."

This Fourth of July, for example, the casino will help present entertainment and a fireworks show at the Clark County Event Center at the Fairgrounds.

Fox-LaRose said she was especially pleased with the culture that has formed over the past two years in the casino.

"We came here with a vision and an idea, but it takes the team to bring that to life," she said. "We have a high focus on building relationships and mutual respect and cooperation and being community minded."

"And I hope that when you walk in you feel that warmth and inviting atmosphere that our team not only serves to the guests but we treat each other that way in the back of the house and all of our relationships."

Fox-LaRose, the top ilani executive, declined to reveal specifics about the casino's financial performance thus far.

"We are experiencing continued growth, month over month," she said. "It's been very positive. And our market reach has expanded as well."

Documents the Mohegan Tribal Gaming Authority, now named Mohegan Gaming & Entertainment, filed with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission provide some hints — but not much else.

On Feb. 2, for example, the authority reported to the SEC that the Cowlitz Tribal Gaming Authority had paid the Mohegan authority \$106.6 million as "the full repayment of the then-outstanding notes and accrued interest, through the repayment date, due to Salishan-Mohegan, LLC in connection with the development of ilani Casino Resort pursuant to the Cowlitz Project, totaling \$32.0 million and \$74.6 million, respectively."

The casino's financing has also shifted; Fox-LaRose said ilani obtained traditional bank financing in December 2018, with Key Bank as the lead financier. The Mohegan Tribal Gaming Authority provided the bulk of the money needed for the project's development, and continues to serve as managing partner, albeit under its new name. Fox-LaRose said the casino's strong growth enabled its owners to refinance at lower interest rates.

On Monday, ilani management and Cowlitz tribal leaders are expected to officially open a convenience store and Chevron gas station. While it's not of the magnitude of the casino, the project fulfilled the promise of a growing entity on the tribe's 152 acres on the west side of I-5. In addition to those acres, the tribe also owns 4 acres directly to the east, on the other side of the freeway.

Also on Monday, casino and tribal officials are expected to announce the next project to be built on the casino and resort site. While the original vision called for a hotel to be constructed, Fox-LaRose and other officials declined to comment about the unannounced project in advance of Monday's event, happening ahead of the complex's two-year anniversary of its opening day, which was April 24, 2017.

As for the possibility of a hotel some day, Fox-LaRose said casino officials are working with the tribe to "really create a vision for the reservation in its entirety, which focuses on the expansion of the business and really ensuring that we can optimize the design."

In addition to casino amenities, that vision includes the likely relocation of the tribal headquarters from Longview in Cowlitz County to a spot on the 156 acres. Also, the tribe would like to build a cultural center, she said.

"We're in the master planning phase now," she said.

The reach of ilani is growing too, Fox-LaRose said. Without a hotel at the site, the tribe anticipated that most of the casino's customers would come from places within a reasonable driving distance — estimated as being within a 75-mile radius. But two years in, customers have started arriving from farther away.

Year two evolution

The first two years at ilani have seen some notable additions and a handful of behind-the-scenes changes, most of which have been driven by customer demand.

The food offerings grew with the addition of Tom's Urban sports bar in late 2017 and the debut of the Line & Lure Seafood Kitchen & Tap buffet, which proved popular enough to be expanded beyond its initial Sunday availability. (The restaurant now offers a \$38 seafood brunch on Saturdays and Sundays.)

In what Fox-LaRose characterized as a course correction, the Rose & Thorn menu was updated to make it less confusing, she said, evolving from a global street food concept to an American/Mediterranean hybrid.

There have also been updates out on the gaming floor. Five hundred slot-type machines have been updated to more popular styles, Fox-LaRose said, including a recently added set of machines with a "Willy Wonka" theme. Those machines are one of two new sets of "wide area progressive" slot machines, which allow jackpots of up to \$1 million.

At the card tables, games such as Let it Ride and Chase the Flush have joined the lineup, and ilani added an option for side bets in some games in response to customer requests.

The casino initially lacked self-service beverage stations for water, coffee and other soft drinks on the gaming floor, which Fox-LaRose said gave some customers the mistaken impression that the drinks weren't complimentary. ilani responded by adding self-service water stations and deploying more beverage carts to the floor.

There have also been some policy changes. The use of fireworks at ilani's inaugural event led to complaints from neighbors, which led the casino to seek the partnership with Clark County for the Fourth of July show at the fairgrounds.

The casino continues to partner with the Clark County Sheriff's Office and Clark County Fire & Rescue to provide emergency medical services at ilani, but the Cowlitz tribe also has a security staff that has grown to nearly 100 people including police officers, surveillance staff and emergency personnel.

The biggest addition in the casino's sophomore year was the \$20 million Cowlitz Ballroom, a 22,000-square-foot meeting and performance space that opened in April 2018. The ballroom can serve as a banquet hall for up to 800 people or a show venue for up to 2,500.

It can also be split into six different rooms for smaller business meetings and events, each accessible through a separate entrance from a perimeter hallway. The venue is part of the structure of the ilani, but is located in a separate wing on the north side of the building, away from the gaming floor.

The main gaming floor is colorful and flashy, with ever-present music, sound effects from the machines and the occasional cheer from the gaming tables. But step down the hallway toward the ballroom and all that noise quickly fades away.

The full ballroom is the largest in the county, and while it's still relatively small compared with major performance arenas, ilani has been able to punch well above its weight in the first year, landing shows from the likes of Jay Leno, Pitbull, Alanis Morissette and Amy Schumer.

Those sorts of performers would typically only be seen at larger venues, but Fox-LaRose said the Cowlitz tribe's partnership with Mohegan Sun has given it the leverage to book bigger acts, billing the ilani shows as a closer and more intimate experience.

Every concert to date has sold out, she said. The big acts are pricey, but the shows are supported by ancillary revenue from the rest of the casino.

Each entertainer is welcomed to ilani in a tribal welcoming ceremony in which they are given a Pendleton woolen blanket, woven in a pattern designed especially for the Cowlitz. The most recent recipient was comedian, actor, and dedicated wood craftsman Nick Offerman, perhaps best known for his role as Ron Swanson on television's "Parks and Recreation."

The Muze Lounge at ilani also includes a performance stage, and Fox-LaRose says the casino has differentiated between the two venues by using the Muze Lounge to host free shows for guests, with a greater emphasis on local talent.

Ballroom shows tend to be on Thursdays and Sundays; Muze Lounge shows are more often on Fridays and Saturdays, when the casino's traffic is at its highest. Fox-LaRose said ilani's target is a minimum of two ballroom shows and one Muze show per month, although a quick glance at the casino's online calendar shows that goal is routinely exceeded.

The casino's staff of roughly 1,500 recently grew with the addition of a dedicated sales team for booking business meetings and events at the Cowlitz ballroom and its sub-rooms, according to Fox-LaRose.

In the beginning

In May, it will have been 20 years since Cowlitz tribal member David Barnett made the first payment on 69 acres of vacant land that eventually became part of the reservation. At the time, Barnett's father, John Barnett, was the chairman of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe. John Barnett died in June 2008.

Over the next two decades, father and son struggled to achieve federal recognition for the tribe, which would open the door to pursuing a casino. That 69 acres eventually grew to 156 acres.

For Cowlitz Indian Tribe chairman and chief executive officer William Iyall, the reservation and its casino were a long time coming for his family.

"It puts us on equal footing with other tribes and gives us opportunities we've never had before," said Iyall, whose grandfather Frank Iyall lobbied for the tribe in Washington, D.C., in the early part of the 20th century.

"My grandfather fought for land for the tribe," Iyall said.

With the casino built and other projects on the way, Iyall said, "we're just getting started."

1800

LOSING LAND

The Cowlitz Indian Tribe loses its land after the tribe refused to sign a treaty that would have forced it to relocate from its historical territory and share a reservation with a historical enemy. The federal government opens the tribe's lands to non-Indian settlement in the 1860s.



Allan Brettman (/author/a_brettman)

Columbian Business Editor

☎ 360-735-4699

👤 @allanbrettman (<https://twitter.com/allanbrettman>)

✉ Send an Email (<mailto:Allan.Brettman@columbian.com>)

Anthony Macuk (/author/amacuk)



ILANI TIMELINE

■ **Mid-1800s:** The Cowlitz Indian Tribe loses its land after the tribe refused to sign a treaty that would have forced it to relocate from its historical territory and share a reservation with a historical enemy. The federal government opens the tribe's lands to non-Indian settlement in the 1860s.

■ **1975:** The Cowlitz start the process seeking Department of Interior tribal recognition.

■ **1982:** John Barnett becomes the general council chairman of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe.

■ **February 2000:** The Bureau of Indian Affairs in the Department of Interior grants the Cowlitz formal, recognized tribal status. The Cowlitz remain the only federally recognized tribe in Washington without land.

■ **July 2004:** The Mohegan Tribe Gaming Authority forms Mohegan Ventures-Northwest LLC, one of three participants in Salishan-Mohegan — the entity formed to operate and manage the proposed casino near Interstate 5 called the Cowlitz Project. Mohegan Ventures-NW holds a 49.15 percent membership interest in Salishan-Mohegan, the Mohegan Tribe holds a 7.85 percent membership interest and Salishan Co.



An aerial photo taken in April 2005 shows the site of the proposed casino.

LLC holds 43 percent. Salishan Co. is owned by Cowlitz Tribe member David Barnett, son of tribe Chairman John Barnett, and Paskenta Gaming Group LLC of the Paskenta Band of Nomiaki Indians of California.

■ **September 2004:** Salishan-Mohegan agrees to assist the Cowlitz Indian Tribe in securing financing, as well as administering and overseeing the proposed casino development.



The casino takes shape as construction continues in May 2016.

■ **2006:** Salishan-Mohegan purchases a 152-acre site for the proposed casino, which was designated to be transferred to the Cowlitz tribe or the United States pursuant to the development agreement.

■ **May 2008:** An environmental impact statement is issued for taking a 152-acre parcel west of La Center into trust on the tribe's behalf. The tribe has applied for the site to become its initial reservation, which would

allow gambling on the property.

■ **June 14, 2008:** Cowlitz tribal Chairman John Barnett dies. He was 73.

■ **December 2010:** The Interior Department's Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs announces approval of the acquisition of the 152-acre Cowlitz Project site into trust for the benefit of the Cowlitz tribe.

■ **January 2016:** Construction begins on the \$510 million complex that will feature casino games, dining, shopping and live performances in 368,000 square feet of space. Construction also begins on a \$32 million overhaul of a nearby Interstate 5 interchange designed to handle 4.5 million visitors annually.

■ **June 2016:** The Cowlitz Casino Project becomes ilani casino resort. Tribal officials say ilani means "sing" in the Cowlitz language.

■ **April 24, 2017:** ilani opens.



Columbian file photos