

Mystic Lake's gold standard

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Just before midnight earlier this month, a robber pulled a gun on two patrons outside the Little Six Casino in Prior Lake. He ran off with their wallets -- and unwittingly left behind a trail of digital surveillance images showing his face and the license plate of his girlfriend's car for security officers to see.

Within hours, a St. Bonifacius man became the latest suspected criminal that Mystic Lake casino surveillance experts have helped nab there and at Little Six.

With state-of-the-art equipment and constant vigilance, Mystic Lake's surveillance division has become a quasi law enforcement agency in its own right, helping to solve crimes from Scott County to St. Cloud.

Its 49 surveillance experts help metro police and FBI agents track and bust criminals who enter the tribal resort complex, from the casinos and hotel to a health club and stores.

"We want our tribal community and our enterprises to be safe for our guests, employees and tribal members," tribal Chairman Stanley R. Crooks said.

"This technology is another tool for the tribal government to use."

Mystic Lake's surveillance system is the first of its kind in Minnesota and a model for other casinos nationwide, industry experts say.

The latest installment is a computerized camera system typically used by police for instant scanning of license plates and identification of stolen cars and scofflaws linked to certain vehicles.

Police and prosecutors say the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community Gaming Enterprise helps law enforcement to find and convict bank robbers, spouse beaters and drug felons. The specialists helped take down, for example, a ring responsible for 22 residential burglaries in Prior Lake last November and numerous other break-ins across the metro area.

In the recent robbery case, specialists used the automated license-plate-recognition system to identify the owner of the getaway car that the perpetrator used, said Scott Scepianiak, gaming compliance officer..

Moments after the robbery was reported at midnight, technicians began retrieving digital images from multiple cameras to retrace the robber's steps, he said.

"We were able to show the law enforcement the surveillance coverage we have and tie the individual back to the vehicle," Scepianiak said.

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They gathered within minutes what used to take days to retrieve with VHS tapes. And within hours, police arrested Ahi Alajuwan Montgomery, 25, after tracing the car to his girlfriend.

Scott County authorities charged him with first-degree robbery. He was jailed in lieu of \$75,000 bail. Court papers say Montgomery confessed after a detective showed him casino surveillance photos.

Ron Hocevar, chief deputy Scott County attorney, said many offenders plead guilty once they learn of the casino's time-stamped surveillance images, which accompany police reports to the prosecutor's office.

"They have an excellent security system, and their security personnel are all first-rate," Hocevar said. "I personally in our office have achieved many convictions. Very few actually get to trial."

He once won a domestic-abuse conviction after showing video in which punches were being thrown in a car parked at Mystic Lake, Hocevar said. "You have a crime captured on digital imagery -- that's pretty powerful evidence," he said.

Officer Mark Tabone, Prior Lake police liaison to the reservation, said the surveillance is so effective that it's becoming difficult for his small police department to keep up.

"We have a great deal of cases that occur out there that are aided by their surveillance coverage," he said.

The casino's specialists, such as Tony Blume of Shakopee, complete at least six months of training, learning how to deal blackjack, handle cash and run computerized cameras as they monitor activity around the clock.

In one of two control rooms, Blume and other specialists each sit before two flat-screen monitors and watch over employees and patrons. They pan and zoom 2,500 cameras that are connected to a computer system, projecting images on a wall of 100-inch screens.

Each of those giant screens can be divided into 16 separate images as specialists drill in for closer looks, right down to reading serial numbers on dollar bills. Security officers are dispatched to any suspicious activity in the two casinos, lots, credit union, bingo hall, stairwells and beyond.

'Mystic Lake stands alone'

"In our experience, Mystic Lake stands alone in terms of video surveillance, and not just in comparison to other Native American casinos," said security expert Robert Grossman.

He was a consultant for a \$10 million overhaul of Mystic Lake's surveillance system in 2005, when he called it "one of the most sophisticated surveillance systems in the world."

The tribe has since invested in more surveillance, including the license-plate-recognition system installed last fall, but officials won't disclose how

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much was spent on upgrades for the resort complex.

Grossman said Mystic is more effective at protecting games than any other casino his firm has worked with, including casinos in Las Vegas, Atlantic City and around the globe.

"There are larger properties and there are more expensive systems," he said, "but Mystic Lake is known in the gaming surveillance industry as the gold standard."

State of the art

Scepaniak said the surveillance system's infrared technology picks up images at night, while an old-style analog, VCR-based system could not. And nobody has to change tapes in 600 VCRs all day long.

It allows surveillance crews to concentrate on what's happening at the moment.

"We try to look for things that just don't look right," said Richard Thake, head of surveillance.

One control room protects game integrity and other community enterprises. The other focuses on protecting guests.

While 99 percent of the patrons are welcome, Scepaniak has a message for criminals: Stay away.

"Out here, because we have these resources, we are

able to identify and detect them, and then coordinate with law enforcement," he said.

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