The National Indian Gaming Association’s (NIGA) 2015 Indian Gaming Tradeshow and Convention boasted a 15% increase in attendance - making it the largest gathering in the event’s 30-year history. The record-breaking attendance combined with the tradeshow’s new initiatives created an exciting and productive atmosphere for business.

Over the past 30 years, NIGA’s Indian Gaming has been the premier event for the Indian gaming community. With a rich history in tradition, the event is a weeklong celebration of tribal gaming, which includes educational seminars and networking events with key tribal leaders including the Tribal Leader’s Reception and a growing show floor of the latest products for the gaming industry. The 30-year anniversary marks an important milestone that is a true testament to the strength of NIGA and the support and commitment of NIGA’s membership. “Our Indian Gaming tradeshow represents the culmination each year of our efforts to advance tribal gaming through education, legislation and community,” said NIGA Chairman Ernest L. Stevens. “We’re thrilled at the progress we have made over 30 years and look forward to continuing to provide our tribal leaders new opportunities for development of their businesses.”

The Indian Gaming 2015 tradeshow kicked the week off with three golf tournaments including the Sovereignty Tournament, Vice Chairman’s Tournament and the Chairman’s Tournament. That evening all attendees enjoyed the Chairman’s Welcome Reception poolside for refreshments, dancing and the Charlie Hill Entertainer of the Year Award. This year’s recipient, Keith Secola, an award-winning figure in contemporary Native American music from the Anishinabe Nation of Minnesota, presents Charlie’s passion for the grass roots era of Indians helping Indians.

New initiatives this year included a redesigned conference program with 15 specialty tracks covering hot topics on Corporate Social Responsibility, Marketing, Leadership Development and Regulatory to name a few. A new Monday Pre-Conference Track featured sessions on What’s Hot in Indian Gaming, Leadership Development in the Tribal Casinos and The Slot Academy.

The Cultural Reception and the Tim Wapato Sovereign Warrior Award was again an amazing event this year. The respected leader Melanie Benjamin, Chief Executive of Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe was presented with the award during Tuesday’s reception. Chief Benjamin was one of those who knew Tim Wapoto and has been a major contributor to NIGA and its efforts in Washington, D.C. Earlier during the Chairman’s Leadership Award Luncheon, Steve Ortiz, former Chairman of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation, was honored for his 15 years of service on tribal council and as Chairman.

In addition, two new powerful keynotes were introduced. Kevin Washburn, Assistant Secretary, Indian Affairs, Department of Interior delivered a powerful keynote address to tribal leaders and professionals with his presentation on restoring trust with Indian Country through tribal conciliation, tribal trust settlements, appropriations and changes to the Indian Child Welfare Act. The balance between the interaction with the keynote from Assistant Secretary Kevin Washburn, and the sounds of the Iroquois singers as they set the scene for the tradeshow floor ribbon cutting was incredible. After Washburn delivered his message on gaming law and regulation, attendees gathered for the tradeshow floor ribbon cutting.

The 2015 NIGA Legislative Agenda included a two-day panel moderated by Mark Norman, with Henry Cagey, Lummi Nation Council; Kevin Leecey, Chairman, Bois Forte Band of Chippewa; Mark Macarro, Chairman, Pechenga Band of Luiseno Indians; David Bean, Puyallup Tribal Council; Jason Giles, NIGA Executive Director, Robert McGhee, Vice Chairman of the Poarch Creek Indians and Matthew Morgan, Chickasaw Nation Gaming Commissioner.

The panel talked about a Carcieri Fix as well as the need for proper implementation of the General Tribal Welfare Exclusion Act. Tax reform was also discussed and tribal sovereignty verses labor relation issues. Internet gaming and the current bills circulating congress was another hot topic as was the IRS proposed rule on win reportings. The Legislative Panel had a tremendous turnout as it covered core responsibilities as...
tribal leaders go into the spring and summer sessions in Washington, DC. These discussions resonated throughout the tradeshow sessions and tribal meetings.

The Economic Development Panel provided further insight on areas of diversification. The panel was moderated by Jamie Fullmer of Bluestone Strategy Group and included W. “Ron” Allen, Tribal Chairman and CEO, Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe; Victor Rocha, Owner and Editor, Pechanga.net; Tony Sanchez, President, Seminole Tribe of Florida, Brian Patterson, President, United South & Eastern Tribes and Sherry Rupert, President, American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association. The Economic Development Panel was another highlight and buzz worthy session of Indian Gaming 2015.

Networking events throughout the week brought tribal leaders and the community together for celebration. The Wendell Chino Humanitarian Award Banquet honored this year’s recipient, W. “Ron” Allen, Tribal Chairman and CEO of the Jamestown S’Klallam tribe. Chairman Allen also previously served two terms as former President of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI). Following the banquet, all guests enjoyed a private concert performance by Foreigner. As lead sponsor for the 30th anniversary edition, the Association of Gaming Equipment Manufacturers (AGEM) hosted a networking party on the show floor for all attendees to enjoy.

Thursday’s keynote panel discussion on The Future of Indian Gaming, moderated by Mark Macarro, Tribal Chairman of the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians, included panelists: Felix Rappaport, President and CEO, Foxwoods Resort Casino; Joe Nayquonabe Jr., Commissioner of Corporate Affairs for the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe; Rosemary Morillo, Chairwoman of Soboba Band of Luiseño Indians and Kevin Brown, Chairman, Mohegan Tribe, captivated the audience with their ideas on diversification and grooming our youth as the future of Indian gaming. The Future of Indian Gaming goes down as one of the highlights of the tradeshow with the leadership sharing their knowledge on the panel as well as the tradeshow floor as Indian Gaming 2015 came to a close.

Indian Gaming 2016 will be held March 13-16 at the Phoenix Convention Center in Phoenix, AZ. Given the resounding success and momentum of the 2015 show, 2016 will no doubt be even bigger and better. ♠

For more information about the National Indian Gaming Association (NIGA), visit indiangaming.org.

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