Shreveport gambling boat opens

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SHREVEPORT — Shreveport's first dockside casino opened for business Monday afternoon with long lines forming hours before the gambling began at 2 p.m. The line started forming outside the pavilion just after 10 a.m. for the public opening of Harrah's riverboat, the Shreveport Rose, and kept growing longer as the opening hour neared.

It ended up snaking more than a mile down the Clyde Fant Parkway along the Red River by the time the doors opened.

Patrons came mainly from north Louisiana, east Texas and the Dallas area.

If anyone finds Harrah's Shreveport a little crowded, there will be more room shortly.

The Isle of Capri in Bossier City will open soon; the boat is stuck in the Red River because of low water. The Horseshoe Casino plans to open in June in Bossier City.

Harrah's riverboat reached its 1,200-person capacity for the first time before noon when VIPs arrived to get first shot at the gambling, forcing waits of up to five hours to get on board.

Shreveport businessman Gus Mijalis, who has ties to a New Orleans riverboat, and state Sen. Don Kelly, D-Natchitoches, were among the dignitaries.

Former Shreveport Mayor Bill Hanna played blackjack, while Natchitoches Mayor Joe Sampite tried his hand briefly at the slots.

Caddo Sheriff Don Hathaway was on board. Shreveport Mayor Hazel Beard, who opposes gambling, was not there.

Ken Pickering, chairman of the Riverboat Gaming Commission, and commission member Sam Gilliam of Shreveport participated in the opening ceremonies.

Gambling patrons entered the third deck of the boat because the river was low. The boat is built in the style of a 19th-century paddle-wheeler and painted in Harrah's colors of purple and teal green.

The boat has 20,000 square feet of gambling space, 800 slot machines and 40 table games, including blackjack, craps, roulette, Big 6 and mini-Baccarat.

The boat is three decks tall with a non-smoking floor, a glass elevator and a three-story atrium.

Unlike boats in other areas, Shreveport boats don't have to leave the dock.

One of the patrons was unhappy with the boarding fee, $3 on weekdays and $5 and $6 on weekends. The fee is good for a 12-hour stay.

"I'm not happy with that," said Genetta Botzong of nearby Taylor. "You don't want to pay a fee to go on a boat when you're going to lose money."

"We wanted to be here for the big deal. It's a lot closer than Vegas," said Sue McKinney of Howe, Texas, who had come with her two sisters, both from other Dallas-area towns.

In the opening hours Linda Edwards of Abilene, Texas, hit it big on a $25 video poker bet by winning $20,000.

Linda Edwards and her husband Lynn of Abilene, Texas, react after winning $20,000 on a slot machine as Shreveport's first dockside casino opened Monday.