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ASKEW NIXON FERGUSON PICKED TO DEVELOP \$75M CASINO

Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects has been selected by Abston-McKay Ventures LLC and Lakes Entertainment Inc. as lead architect for the \$75 million Sportsman Casino and Lodge in Tunica.

Design on the recently announced project is expected to be complete by October; construction should start late this year. The property could be open by the end of 2011.

For Askew Nixon, the project represents one of its largest deals in recent months and may signal a recovery in the architecture industry.

“It was pretty grim for the first two and a half months (this year), but we’re starting to see some things come in,” Askew says. “A lot of our big clients like FedEx and the University of Memphis are starting to crank up some things that were on hold.”

Askew’s perspective echoes the American Institute of Architects’ Architectural Billings Index, which rose to 44.8 in February, up from 42.5 in January. A score below 50 indicates a decrease in billings. March numbers are due next week.

Oxford, Miss.-based Abston-McKay and Minnetonka, Minn.-based Lakes Entertainment are co-developing the project, which will be located at the site of the former Isle of Capri

casino near Sam’s Town Casino and Hotel on Casino Strip. Askew Nixon will redesign the 220-room hotel left by Isle of Capri when it closed in 2002. The casino will be a new building Askew Nixon is designing as part of the project.

Lee Askew, a principal with Askew Nixon, says the project represents a return to casino architecture for the firm, which designed Sam’s Town in Tunica in 1993 and has worked on smaller projects at Tunica casino properties. Askew Nixon also has designed casinos in Louisiana and Illinois.

Kevin Hunter, CEO of Abston-McKay Ventures, says the company considered firms “inside and outside the city of Memphis” before choosing Askew Nixon.

“We went with them because (Askew has) a great vision of this area and world-class credentials in the gaming industry,” Hunter says. “There are a lot of people throwing out ideas on this project and he’s keeping us pulled together to keep the focus on this project.”

Askew says the new casino will include more than 40,000 square feet of gaming space on one level, a 1,200-seat theater and “one of the largest buffets in the area.” Plans are in place for a 5,000-square-foot VIP players lounge, new swimming

pools, a poker room and retail space. The number of hotel rooms will increase to 230. The project received site approval from the Mississippi Gaming Commission last month.

Askew Nixon isn’t the only local firm finding business in casino projects. Hnedak Bobo Group Inc. was recently named lead architect on the \$500 million West Valley Resort near Glendale, Ariz.

“We’re really going to gut it so everything will be brand new, from wall surfaces to fixtures and carpeting,” Askew says. “You won’t even know you’re in an older building.”

Lakes is an offshoot of the company that originally developed Grand Casino properties in Tunica, Biloxi and Gulfport in the late 1990s. Lakes sold its Grand properties to Caesars in 1998 and left the Tunica market shortly thereafter. Harrah’s Entertainment Inc. bought the Grand properties (along with Horseshoe) in 2004 and 2005. Ironically, Harrah’s original property in Tunica was located at the old Isle of Capri site until 1999.

Scott Barber, division president of Harrah’s Entertainment,

says he doesn't know enough details to speculate on the possibility of success for Sportsman, which will join nine other casinos currently in operation in Tunica County.

"We're the biggest and baddest and we weren't successful at that site, so they must know something we don't," Barber says.

Askew says with architects and engineers combined, the firm will have about 15 people working on design. Salt Lake City-based Okland Construction Co. Inc. will be the general contractor on the project. Subcontractors have not been chosen.

Hunter says even though the development process is "lengthy and involved," Sportsman is proceeding as planned toward the 2011 opening target.

"We want to move as quickly as possible, but we also want to make the right decisions," Hunter says. "What you don't want to do is get in a hurry with a project of this magnitude. We want to make sure it's high quality."

Read more: Askew Nixon picked to design \$75M casino - Memphis Business Journal