



BURR LEWIS staff photographer

Shirley Nicosia of Penfield plays Wild Cougar at the Finger Lakes Gaming and Racetrack in Farmington, which has more than 1,000 machines and averages 3,000 to 4,000 visitors weekdays and 8,000 to 9,000 weekend days.

# Racino draws in thousands

*DLC 3-9-04*

**JOSEPH SPECTOR**  
STAFF WRITER

FARMINGTON — The parking lot at Finger Lakes Gaming and Racetrack begins to fill at 9:40 a.m., but no one gets out of the car.

The slot machines won't start spinning until 10 a.m.

On this Monday, drivers monitor the clock. Some smoke cigarettes with windows half cracked; others fill out entry forms for the track's giveaways on dashboards.

Then — in eerie unison — ignitions turn off, car doors slam and 30 people gather under a purple and yellow canopy near the casino's entrance. Less than five minutes to go.

A few are parents who slipped away while the kids are at school. Bartender Jerry Panna, 48, of Geneva, Ontario County, won \$500 a week ago, so he's back.

Shirley Kaczan, 50, a student on spring break from



**Shirley Kaczan**

"It's something to do on a dreary Monday morning."

Finger Lakes Community College, has \$100 to spend. It's her first trip here.

"It's something to do on a dreary Monday morning," she says.

As the doors open, the group disperses into the maze of flashing machines. And the 16-hour day at Finger Lakes is under way.

A similar scene has played out every day since the racetrack opened its \$10.5 million gambling hall with 1,010 video lottery terminals.

So far, the Rochester area's first foray into casino gambling is a success, the track and some area businesses said.

Since opening Feb. 18, the racino averages 3,000 to 4,000 people each weekday and 8,000 to 9,000 people each weekend day. The customers mainly come from within a two-hour radius — about 78 percent from the Rochester area.

Through the close of business Sunday, gross sales have topped \$46.2 million, according to the state Lottery Division. After payouts for prizes, net revenues are \$3.5 million, with \$2.1 million designated for the state for education. The rest goes to the track and the state Lottery.

Finger Lakes, which employs 240 full- and part-time casino workers, expects larger crowds when horse racing resumes in April.

Restaurants near the track say business is up 15 percent to 20 percent.

"It's the best thing that could happen to the area,"

said Alex Styliadis, manager at Park Place Diner near the track.

The state is banking on the success of VLTs at Finger Lakes and seven other New York racetracks.

Saratoga Gaming and Raceway was the first and, the only other, to open. Gross sales there have topped \$100 million since opening Jan. 28.

Faced with a court mandate to increase school funding, Gov. George Pataki wants the state to expand gambling again, this time with up to eight privately run VLT casinos.

Gamblers at Finger Lakes joked that having the VLTs so close to home is dangerously addictive. Some, however, tried to justify their future losses.

"If more of the proceeds go to taxes and helping the kids, I'm all for it," Kaczan said. □

JSPLECTOR@DemocratandChronicle.com