

Jersey Shorecast Panel: Offering Customers More Fun Experiences Is Key for Atlantic City, Shore

Increased Tourist Spending Predicted Through Diversifying the Market

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Galloway, N.J. - Atlantic City and other southern New Jersey shore resorts are diversifying the kinds of entertainment and other “fun experiences” the region has to offer to new customers as well as traditional ones, a strategy that is working, according to panelists at the Jersey Shorecast held in Atlantic City today.

The market has focused on growing non-casino revenue from shopping, dining, entertainment and longer hotel stays, drawing more people here for major events in the wake of four casino closings and concerns about Atlantic City’s economy.

The annual event, sponsored by the Lloyd D. Levenson Institute of Gaming, Hospitality & Tourism (LIGHT) of Stockton University, featured two panels of experts from Stockton and the tourism industry. The panels were moderated by Rummy Pandit, executive director of LIGHT, and Felicia Grondin, LIGHT associate director.

Atlantic City Mayor Don Guardian welcomed attendees and said the city is “tracking almost \$1 billion in development in Atlantic City,” including a campus for Stockton University and offices for South Jersey Gas. He said the city is “putting together a plan for recovery,” by working with the state government.

Guardian said business was strong over Memorial Day Weekend, and with “six beach concerts - double the number last year,” plus the Atlantic City Airshow moving back to mid-week in August, and an Iron Man competition and Miss America Pageant scheduled, prospects for the tourism season look bright.

“Cape May County is definitely seeing growth - the occupancy tax is up 4.2 percent over last year,” said Diane Wieland, director of the Cape May County Department of Tourism. She said

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that while the beach and boardwalk remain the county's biggest draws, more tourists are visiting to tour wineries, breweries and farms, and to eat at "farm-to-table" restaurants. "Weddings are huge," as a segment of tourism, she noted.

Another example of diversifying the market is targeting youth sports, said Gary Musich, vice president of convention sales at Meet AC. "This year the Convention Center brought in 50,000 cheerleaders in two shows - one show was 25,000 alone, and that was in January," he said.

He said meetings and conventions are important to introduce new visitors to the market, and then "people return to destinations where their convention was held," particularly when they know about other amenities such as golf and shopping.

He said stays have expanded from two days to two-and-a-half days, with visitors spending as much as \$1,000 a day on food, golf and shopping. Vicki Clark, president of the Cape May County Department of Commerce, said, "It's always beneficial to the host location to expand" the amenities offered, which increases the length of stays.

"We need to market events," Musich said, noting that Atlantic City has "the biggest airshow on the East Coast," as well as beach concerts and sports collectors shows.

Meeting Planners International, a group of 2,000 event planners, is coming to town for four days, Musich noted. "These people represent \$1.7 billion in tourism spending."

Michael Busler, professor of Business Studies at Stockton, predicted a 5 percent to 6 percent increase in business this year, up from last year's 4.6 percent increase.

"Nationally, more than two million more people are working and personal incomes are going up," he said. Having more discretionary income leads to "spending more dollars on vacationing. As long as the weather holds out, I think this will be a really good summer," Busler said.

Stockton Seaview Hotel & Golf Club's director of sales and marketing, Mike Tidwell, said Seaview offers golfing, business and leisure facilities, and the hotel was filled to capacity on Saturday and Sunday. He said strong demand for rooms is a growing trend.

Brian Tyrrell, associate professor of Hospitality and Tourism Management Studies at Stockton, pointed out that year-over-year, the share of business from non-gaming segments of the market is up. Non-casino hotels are up 11 percent year-over-year, he said, and gaming business from closed casinos went to other Atlantic City casinos, strengthening the market.

Cape May County's Clark mentioned that the Jersey Shore will be attractive to visitors who have concerns about international travel and terrorism and would rather stay closer to home. She also said the county has developed a hospitality training program for small businesses, so visitors feel welcomed and part of the community, leading to return business.

Another sought-after market segment is millennials, those who came of age around the year 2000.

"My best attraction for millennials coming to Atlantic City is Stockton," said Joseph Kelly, president of the Greater Atlantic City Chamber of Commerce. "I am so bullish on higher education and what an opportunity we have to attract millennials." He mentioned the attractive prospect of beachfront residences at the university's planned residential campus.

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Other topics of discussion included:

- Owners of second homes are extending the spring and fall seasons, particularly in Cape May County, said Clark;
- The lower exchange rate with Canadian currency per dollar is hurting Cape May County's traditional base of tourists from there, but lower gas prices may offset that, according to Wieland;
- Expanding casinos to North Jersey casinos would be "devastating to Atlantic City," Busler said, with Kelly saying that it could force the closing of two more casinos, with the loss of thousands of jobs;
- Increasing the minimum wage would do more harm than good for many businesses in the area, Busler said;
- Reactions were mixed to a proposal to allow alcohol in some locations on the Atlantic City Boardwalk. Busler said, "The minuses come out ahead of the pluses," while Kelly said it can be controlled and "has a little more of a plus upside." Tyrrell said: "One of Atlantic City's strengths is adult entertainment." He advised the city to "go for it."

"We want to be a destination of varied opportunities and varied products," said Pandit, in summing up.

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