

Shorecast Panelists Say More Variety Should Bring More Visitors to the Jersey Shore

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Galloway, N.J. _ Providing new and different ways to attract visitors and convince them to stay longer will help the Jersey shore have not just a good summer season in 2018, but a longer tourism season in general speakers said at the 10th annual Jersey Shorecast held Tuesday at Stockton Seaview Hotel & Golf Club and sponsored by the Lloyd D. Levenson Institute for Gaming, Hospitality and Tourism at Stockton University.

That diversification will now include sports betting, but also e-sports, sports tourism, beverage tourism, eco-tourism, retail, entertainment, and building the family market.

“After Taj Mahal and Showboat closed we knew we had to do something different,” said guest speaker Anthony Catanoso, an owner and managing partner of Steel Pier Associates. “We know the market is there if we give them a reason to come.”

That reason was the new enclosed Observation Wheel, which can operate year-round and give visitors a unique experience.

“People still want family entertainment,” Catanoso said of the rides and improvements at Steel Pier. He said he and his family never gave up on Atlantic City, a place he has loved since he was a kid and saw Diana Ross and the Supremes perform.

“We do what we have to do to compete,” he said.

The theme of diversification continued with a panel discussion on the upcoming season, and the potential impact of sports betting. Panelists agreed sports betting would be welcome, but likely as part of a larger package of entertainment, and there are still a lot of unknowns about how it will be implemented.

“We are in uncharted waters,” said Jim Ziereis, vice president of Hotel Sales for Tropicana Atlantic City. “(Sports betting) is not a big revenue producer, but it drives overnight stays, or weekend stays. It’s a part of the overall experience.”

Jim Wood, president and CEO of Meet AC, Atlantic City’s Tourism Economic Development Corporation, said e-sports is also a growing market, both with those who like to play tournaments, and those who like to watch.

“This is a whole new business opportunity we’re looking at,” he said.

Wood said long-term, the city has convention bookings through 2025.

“A win for us is if they come for a convention, then come back with their families,” Ziereis said.

Diane Wieland, director of the Cape May County Department of Tourism said last summer’s weather affected business, but the county saw increases in the fall and winter.

She and others said people are taking shorter visits, and extending the season is one way to get people to return.

“We are doing an intensive fall campaign but we have to let people know there is plenty to do,” she said. Beverage tourism with wineries and distilleries is growing, as is sports and eco-tourism.

“An event is not just competitors, but also their families, friends and supporters,” she said. “We are one of the top three birding spots in North America and you can do that and still also have a spa and great dining.”

With people staying shorter periods, offering events and activities that can lure visitors in the middle of the week is also a growing market. Hard Rock was praised for booking entertainment on more than just weekends.

“Mid-week is a struggle,” said Mike Tidwell, director of sales and marketing at Stockton Seaview Hotel & Golf Club. “Golf is our big draw for repeat business.”

He said wedding business is strong, but people are staying for less time, and making reservations more at the last minute than planning in advance.

Brian Tyrrell, professor of Hospitality and Tourism Management Studies at Stockton, said the opening of the Hard Rock and Ocean Resort should increase lodging revenue overall for the city, but extending the season and offering more mid-week options will also be crucial to revenue.

“It provides more options, which is wonderful,” he said of the two new properties. “It also puts pressure on the existing operators to upgrade.”

He and Wieland both noted that more visitors are using online travel agents or OTAs like, Airbnb and VRBO to book their stays at homes and condos rather than using traditional real estate agents or hotel sites, which has generated the question of the impact on occupancy tax revenue.

Wood said a survey they did with one convention found that participants had stayed at 32 different properties rather than just the three hotels that had reserved blocks of rooms for the event.

“Hotels are trying harder now to get direct to customers and not use the OTA,” said Rummy Pandit, executive director of the Levenson Institute.

In response to questions, panelists said it is too early to speculate on the potential for marijuana tourism.

Wood said expanding the airport remains a challenge because carriers want subsidies to operate out of Atlantic City.

“Airlines base their decisions on outbound traffic, and we don’t have the corporate base for that,” he said.

Wood also said they would like to expand the “pedestrian” market to make it easier for people to move through the city and find other attractions, but there is not much funding.

Tyrrell said that is happening on a micro-scale with individual businesses and events like Little Water Distillery, development on Tennessee Avenue and the upcoming 48 Blocks citywide arts celebration event in June.

Wood also said they are reaching out to attract a more diverse market and that the Indian market is especially growing.

“There is a high level of interest in Atlantic City,” he said.

PHOTO CAPTION: Jersey Shorecast panelists, from left, Brian Tyrrell, professor of Hospitality and Tourism Management Studies at Stockton University, Diane Wieland, director of the Cape May County Department of Tourism, Mike Tidwell, director of sales and marketing at Stockton Seaview Hotel & Golf Club, Jim Zierys, vice president of hotel sales for Tropicana Atlantic City, and Jim Wood, president and CEO of Meet AC.

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Contact:
Diane D’Amico
Director of News and Media Relations
Galloway, N.J. 08205
Diane.D’Amico@stockton.edu

609-652-4593

stockton.edu/media