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Stockton's Hughes Center Jersey Shorecast Cautiously Calls for Sunny Tourism Season

Region's Experts Says Visitors Will Hit Beaches and Attractions if Businesses Provide Value

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Galloway Township, NJ- The Jersey Shore's unique attributes – sandy beaches, family-friendly boardwalks, casinos and world-class entertainment, all located within a tank of gas of 300 million people – will again lure visitors in 2010, so long as businesses provide value for their customers' dollars. That was the consensus of a panel of experts presenting data and opinions at the 2nd Annual Jersey Shorecast hosted by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy of The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

"I wouldn't say we are looking at a banner year, but the hope and expectation is for a good season," said Diane Wieland of the Cape May County Department of Tourism. "Last June was extremely difficult because of bad weather, but we picked up significantly in July and August, despite all the dire warnings about the economy. We're looking at a brighter picture this year."

Wieland based her projections on a survey her organization conducted which indicated more visitors would be willing to come to the Shore despite unemployment numbers still hovering near 10 percent and a trend of guests spending less. "We showed a three percent increase in the number of people who said the economy would not affect their vacation plans," she said. "What we are seeing is a more savvy consumer shopping the Internet for good prices and negotiation for deals. The message to businesses is be flexible or your customer will find someone else who is."

Jay Gillian, owner and operator of an amusement pier and water park in Ocean City and amusements in Sea Isle City said his businesses were fortunate enough to escape any downturn last year, despite the nation's economic woes.

"The biggest single factor for us is the weather," Gillian said. "If I have noticed any one trend it is the media outlets and their 10-day forecasts can influence things. If somebody is thinking about spending a few thousand dollars and the weather people are calling for

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(bad weather) it is going to impact you.” Despite this, Gillian said his parks have posted strong numbers and have not shown any kind of dip. “We are fortunate to be in Ocean City and Sea Isle, right off the (garden State) Parkway, where (vacation housing) rentals have been strong and where people come even when gas prices go up.”

Dr. Oliver Cooke, a Stockton economics professor and author of several much-quoted studies on the region, backed up those opinions and added such performance was remarkable in the face of other dire numbers.

“Overall employment was down four percent, casino employment’s drop was double that at eight percent, restaurant and bar employment was down five percent, while retail employment remained flat.” Cooke said businesses managed to survive despite such numbers and that certain exceptions, such as Gillian’s, actually thrived. “One of the difficulties in looking at year-to-year numbers is that each year presents its own unique challenges,” he said. “In ’09 it was the weather and the year before gas prices spiked sharply and reduced tourism numbers. So all things usually aren’t equal.”

According to Israel Posner, Executive Director of the Stockton Institute of Gaming said Atlantic City’s casino revenue numbers have dropped but that the city’s re-invention with increased non-casino attractions could play a significant role in making up the difference. “It’s certainly no secret that gaming revenues have dropped but what is not so well-known is that non-casino revenues have reached 20 percent and are growing each year,” Posner said. “As (attractions) continue to increase it is looking more and more promising for Atlantic City.” He added that casinos were evolving more into entertainment venues. With fewer discretionary dollars to give up at the gaming tables, he said visitors were more likely to seek value for their dollars by taking in a show, shopping or hitting the beaches.

Speaking of value, Wieland said technology was playing a large role in visitors’ ability to get the most bang for their bucks. “Mobile devices such as smart phones allow people to shop price on the go,” she said. “Our survey indicated 92 percent of our respondents would be influenced in their decisions by coupons and other discounts, and many of these may be obtained instantly on their phones. Smart vacationers use tools such as Google Alerts to find out where the deals are. They can make spur of the moment decisions. If they don’t come down for a week they still go for what we call a ‘day-cation,’” she said.

Sharon Schulman, Executive Director of the Hughes Center, asked the event participants to project a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” for the season, and all the panelists responded with smiles and digits pointed skyward.

The Shorecast was moderated by Dr. Michael Busler, an Associate Professor of Finance, Finance Track Coordinator, and a Fellow at the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy. For more information on future Hughes Center events visit the Website: www.stockton.edu/hughescenter.

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From left, Jay Gillian and Dr. Israel Posner

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