

Jersey Shorecast Predicts Good Summer

For immediate release: with photos

May 12, 2021

Atlantic City, N.J. - The Jersey Shore is rebounding from COVID-19 restrictions and the availability of ample outdoor activities should help make the summer of 2021 a good season, if not quite yet a full recovery panelists said at the 13th Annual Jersey Shorecast sponsored by the Lloyd D. Levenson Institute of Gaming, Hospitality and Tourism (LIGHT) and held via Zoom on May 12.

They said while visitors may be back, convention business will recover more slowly. The job loss during the pandemic has also created a new hiring dynamic that will take some time to level out.

The panel was moderated by Matthew Doherty, executive director of the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority.

Panelists were:

- Oliver Cooke: professor of economics at Stockton University and editor of the South Jersey Economic Review
- Jamie Hoagland, marketing director of Tennessee Avenue Beer Hall, Rhythm & Spirits and Bar 32 in Atlantic City
- Larry Sieg, president and CEO of Meet AC
- Diane Wieland, director of tourism, Cape May County, Department of Tourism.

“This year seems more important than ever,” said LIGHT Coordinator Jane Bokunewicz, as shore businesses look to recover from the pandemic while still maintaining safety protocols.

Doherty said there is reason to be optimistic. Items ranging from the continuation of the open-container law allowing people to have alcoholic beverages outdoors, more police officers in the tourism district and even renovated restrooms are all signs that Atlantic City is open and ready for summer.

“We are very bullish on a tremendous 2021 for Atlantic City and the Jersey Shore,” Doherty said.

Following is a recap of questions and responses:

Q: How was the 2020 season?

Larry Sieg: Atlantic City did better than anticipated since casinos were able to open in July and people were ready to get outdoors.

Jamie Hoagland: Having the casino restaurants closed pushed people to other locations. We had outside dining and had lines every night.

Diane Wieland: The beach communities did well because people could be outdoors. We outpaced 2019 in September and October. The campgrounds were huge. They were safe, controlled, and brought in new customers who are now coming back. That helped a lot since we did not have the Canadians.

Oliver Cooke: There was lockdown fatigue, and the inability to fly to other destinations, plus allowing casinos to open in July, all pushed the season well above what was initially expected. The fourth quarter data showed momentum we are seeing into 2021.

Q: What changes from 2020 will remain, and what will go?

Jamie Hoagland: Delivery services like Door Dash and Uber Eats will continue and we will also still push outdoor dining.

Diane Wieland: Open space and nature-based options like birding will remain and even grow. We have a large number of baby boomers but are now also looking at millennials – what they are interested in. The pandemic gave us more of an opportunity to do research on who is visiting and what do they want.

Larry Sieg: We have to stay engaged with clients even more often. The convention business is still highly affected by the pandemic. We learned we can work from home, but also it's still important to be in the office to engage and brainstorm. We'll continue a hybrid work model. The convention business will be even more competitive as things open more.

Matt Doherty: Online gaming took off and sports betting was off the charts. But we're also looking at non-gaming amenities like the arcade and waterpark at Showboat, smaller concerts. Cannabis is also a future tourism opportunity.

Diane Wieland: We had started noticing pre-COVID that people would stay longer because they could work remotely. That expanded during COVID with second homeowners and even businesses working remotely. Sea Isle saw a huge increase in Airbnb bookings to \$4 million in 2020.

Q: What is the new normal?

Diane Wieland: The number of winter residents is growing. Second homeowners are using their property and renting it less. The year-round rental market is growing. This will allow businesses to grow if they have more year-round business.

Oliver Cooke: The housing market is hot. Single home prices in Atlantic and Cape May counties were up 18%. That's ahead of the state and national market. People are looking for more space and interest rates are low. More are working from home and want flexibility. It will be interesting to keep an eye on if they become permanent residents.

Larry Sieg: I call it the "now" normal. Conventions are becoming much more competitive and large conventions are now becoming smaller, regional conventions, which is good for Atlantic City.

Jamie Hoagland: Being clean and safe is still important. We are using QR code menus, though we still have paper menus. We did some tracking and found from 25,000 scans, most were from New York City and specifically the Bronx, which was surprising.

Q: Did you change your marketing or your message?

Diane Wieland: At first we cancelled the old campaign and just focused on saying we're here and will be ready. When we could open the message was reopening safely and having exciting places and open spaces. That is still the message.

Larry Sieg: We are re-enforcing that you can hop in the car and come to the beach since people were not on planes. And the mindful approach to opening clean, safe and healthy. There is a focus now on regenerative tourism and corporate responsibility. Companies come to meet, but also want to do something in the community – a beach cleanup, or neighborhood program.

Q: How would you describe the region's current circumstances?

Oliver Cooke: The momentum started in the fourth quarter of 2020. There is an enormous tailwind for the economy because of lockdown fatigue and people wanting to get outside. There is also the national discourse about job openings, but that will shake out.

Larry Sieg: After a natural disaster, there is a recovery period that is typically three to five years. People have to be aware of that. Right now we can be at 30% of capacity (at the Convention Center). That means just under 10,000 people. Right now we have 170 events on the books through 2025. I even got a call about an event for 2032.

Diane Wieland: We are seeing an increase in smaller meetings, and people are rebooking events that were cancelled.

Jamie Hoagland: We are getting a lot of rebooking for events for 25-40 people. The phone keeps ringing. We even had a few wedding receptions for the fall outdoors.

Q: What do you see as the impact of gaming and legalized cannabis in New York City?

Oliver Cooke: That is a concern. You have to look at the larger South Jersey economy and the importance of diversification and not just gaming. Gaming isn't going away, but it has declined in importance already.

Q: What is your view of vaccine passports?

Diane Wieland: We have not had a lot of discussion about that. We are just watching the numbers of those being vaccinated.

Larry Sieg: We are in a state building, so we will follow the lead of Trenton.

Jamie Hoagland: I don't see us asking for one. We'll just continue following social distancing.

Q: Have you had trouble finding workers?

Jamie Hoagland: Yes, for the back of the house, the cooks, dishwashers. We get tons of applications, but they either don't show up for the interview or don't show up for work.

Oliver Cooke: There is a lot going on about this. The extended unemployment insurance is a double-edged sword. It can discourage job hunting, but it also has supported consumer spending. For some, the fear of getting COVID is still very real and the jobs that are very face-to-face may be harder to fill. Child care is still a real issue. The J-1 student work visa program has a huge backlog and that is huge for summer workers. And then there is just a general churn in labor as people came back but looked for different jobs. This is all somewhat to be expected, it's a road bump to getting the job market back.

Q: Is the arcade and waterpark at Showboat sustainable year round?

Matt Doherty: Yes. People want an experience in January through March that is local. Showboat's business model is to come up with ideas that others are not doing.

Q: How can we make Atlantic City and the Boardwalk more exciting and America's Playground again?

Larry Sieg: We need to have a unified Destination Marketing Organization. Now everything is in silos. We are looking at rebranding. We need to be competitive in promoting not just Atlantic City, but the entire Jersey Shore.

Matt Doherty: We are working with the merchants and the city. The Boardwalk is the city's greatest asset. We do need to look at signage, lighting, restrooms. The signage does look tired.

Q: What do you predict for 2021?

Diane Wieland: The momentum started last year. It's going to be a great year. Rentals are skyrocketing. It may take 2-3 years to get back to the 2019 level, but we hope for sooner.

Oliver Cooke: The summer should be excellent, but the base for comparison is low.

Jamie Hoagland: We are excited and predicting a great summer.

Larry Sieg: I think Atlantic City will have a great summer. With more outdoor restrictions lifted, that will bring more people down who want to get outdoors. Meetings and

conventions are still based on state restrictions, but even a 30% capacity helps. We're focusing on outdoor and sporting events that can be done safely. We're also looking at movie production companies doing filming and the Sports Illustrated photo shoot.

How those predictions turn out will be discussed in October, when LIGHT presents the fall Shoreview on Oct. 21.

More than 75 people attended the event. A video recording of the Shorecast is on the Levenson Institute website at stockton.edu/light.

#

Contact:

Diane D'Amico

Director of News and Media Relations

Galloway, N.J. 08205

Diane.D'Amico@stockton.edu

609-652-4593

609-412-8069

stockton.edu/media

Stockton University

Stockton University is [ranked](#) among the top public universities in the Northeast. Our almost 10,000 students can choose to live and learn on the 1600-acre wooded main campus in the Pinelands National Reserve in South Jersey and at our coastal residential campus just steps from the beach and Boardwalk in Atlantic City. The university offers more than 160 undergraduate and graduate programs. Learn more at Stockton.edu.