

Jersey Shorecast Predicts Good Summer

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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.

