

Jersey Shorecast Predicts Promising 2025 Summer Despite Economic Uncertainty

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Atlantic City, N.J. — Economic uncertainty is the chief concern for businesses at the Jersey Shore this summer, while regional tourism experts remain optimistic about modest gains over last year.

“Uncertainty” about the economy, labor market and international travel dominated the discussion at the 17th annual Jersey Shorecast on May 21, sponsored by the Lloyd D. Levenson Institute of Gaming, Hospitality and Tourism (LIGHT) at the Stockton University School of Business. The discussion was held at the Stockton University Atlantic City John F. Scarpa Academic Center and streamed online.

LIGHT Faculty Director Jane Bokunewicz opened the discussion, which was moderated by Nicholas Huba, journalist and digital editor for The Press of Atlantic City.

Panelists reflected a cross-section of hospitality and tourism from Atlantic and Cape May counties, including:

- Karina Anthony, executive director of marketing at Visit Atlantic City
- Oliver Cooke, associate professor of Economics at Stockton and editor of the South Jersey Economic Review
- Joann DeIVescio, executive director of New Jersey Campground Owners and Outdoor Lodging Association
- Ben Rose, director of marketing and public relations, Greater Wildwoods Tourism Authority

Before the discussion, Bokunewicz presented statistics from a “less robust” 2024 season that was marred by the cancellation of the Visit Atlantic City Airshow and absence of beach concerts. Total gross gaming revenue was down 0.2% from 2023, average total employment for the season declined nearly 1%, and 0.4% fewer vehicles passed through the Atlantic City Expressway Pleasantville Toll Plaza compared to the prior year.

Bokunewicz said Atlantic City casinos are reporting record internet gaming, which has surpassed brick-and-mortar gaming revenue but are seeing a slight decline in net revenue due to fewer hotel stays.

Anthony said increased events planned in Atlantic City, as well as a marketing campaign highlighting surrounding amenities like wineries and golf courses, are intended to combat last summer's lackluster numbers.

"We are focusing on more and new events in Atlantic City and promoting experiences, the memory-making moment you can have in Atlantic City," Anthony said.

Rose said the Wildwoods are centering messages on affordability.

"Visitors may go out to dinner one or two nights a week instead of four or five, but they're looking for authentic experiences, and they're looking for things that the family can do that don't cost a lot of money. We're promoting our affordability in the Wildwoods, and all the free things there are to do with free concerts three nights a week, our free beaches and affordable attractions and affordable hotel rooms," said Rose, who expects to see a 3% increase over the record 2024 summer.

Following is a recap of the questions and some of the answers from the panel:

How did the local tourism industry perform in 2024?

Ben Rose: Last summer we had a 5% increase over 2023, and 2023 was a record year. So, we did fairly well, but not as well as projected. The average length of stay is down over previous years, and that's a trend going forward. We see the average length of stay of around 3.5 days. People are taking more frequent vacations, but they're taking shorter vacations. So, you have that occupancy midweek that isn't filled. I think they'll have to do better at running specials and filling that occupancy midweek.

Joann DeIVescio: 2021 and 2022 were incredible. We leveled off in 2024. We probably didn't do as well as expected, but a lot of that had to do with the weather last year, especially in the camping industry.

Oliver Cooke: 2021 and 2022 were obviously huge bounce back years. There was enormous pent-up demand. I think that we're kind of at this point where we're trying to figure out post-COVID, are we going to get back to where we were? We're still not yet back to where we were in 2019 employment-wise.

How would you describe the region's current economic circumstances?

DeIVescio: I think we have the best beaches and boardwalk in the entire country. I think that it's always going to be a huge attraction to come to New Jersey, whether you're staying in Atlantic City, Wildwood or whether you're camping. There's that memory of when you were younger and you came to the Jersey Shore. That's still resonating with folks today.

Karina Anthony: What we're doing is we're doing a lot of regional marketing to New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and we are seeing an uptick in extended stays. We're really looking to increase that one-night stay to two or three nights.

Rose: I think you can sum it up with one word: uncertainty. Right now, people are uncertain what the economy is going to be in the next several months. They're waiting to make their vacation plans. They're booking closer to time of departure than ever.

Do you feel concerns about the 2024 season will continue to have an impact on 2025 summer tourism?

Anthony: We have to bring new events and reimagine current events. We have, for example, the Soar & Shore Festival that we're bringing. Instead of two days of the air show, it's a week-long event. We're putting everything together, having people extend their stays and diversifying our offerings here in Atlantic City, because I think we need to have various amenities to combat new casinos opening up around us. I think it's important to highlight your offerings in a new way to have people think differently.

DeVescio: There are events that (the camping community) are very attuned to that are happening, and that's when they want to come and stay. Seventy-five percent of the campgrounds in New Jersey are located in Cape May and Atlantic counties. There are about 13,000 campsites in those two counties.

Rose: We have over 165 events and festivals each year. We use our events mainly to extend the season. Right now, we have our season extended well into October. The Barefoot Country Music Fest has a tremendous economic impact. Not only does it make an economic impact at the beginning of the summer in the shoulder season, but it does introduce a lot of new people to the Wildwoods. Hopefully, they'll come back and vacation there.

Do you see current foreign policy impacting New Jersey's summer tourism season? How important is J-1 visa program to the area.

Rose: Here there are not enough local students or local workers to fill those spots. We rely on those J-1 visa students to fill all those working spots, and it would be a very difficult situation for each hotel owner and every business at any of the destinations to fill those positions. Kids are in sports year-round these days. They have enrichment programs in the summer — they're just busy. There are not enough student workers to fill these spots, so we have to go overseas to go after these J-1 visa students

DeVescio: We've had probably an 80% cancellation rate so far this year in some of the campgrounds by Canadians. I do think it's foreign policy. I do think it's the tariffs. I think it's also the exchange rate. So that definitely is going to have an impact. We have a lot of things working against us this year. I think we just have to go with the flow for this year and work as hard as we can to make sure that we continue to welcome our Canadian visitors when they do want to come back.

Cooke: About 4,000 to 5,000 J-1 summer workers make their way to the Jersey Shore every summer. I don't know if the current policy is going to affect it this summer, but there are huge cuts at the State Department scheduled to start in fiscal 2026, which would mean next summer. This could be an even bigger problem for the shore, because the entire program that runs the J-1 visa program is basically slated to be removed from the State Department. From what I've read, I think that's the bigger issue.

Anthony: We are seeing lead volume down in terms of meetings and events. It's happening nationwide. It's approximately 70% among larger destinations, and for us it's about 50%. For example, we have stopped advertising in Canada. But we have diverted those funds to different types of advertising for our group tour markets.

Rose: We have to replace those visitors with other visitors, that's all. When Canadians were barred from traveling during the COVID years, we did very well. We had record-breaking years every year, so we're able to adapt. We want our Canadian visitors. We welcome them with open arms, but if they're not coming. We have to adapt.

Do you anticipate anything else impacting performance this summer? What will the impact be?

Cooke: It's pretty clear that the overall pace of consumer spending slowed markedly from late 2024 to the first quarter of 2025. I think the general uncertainty that hangs over the economy has consumers worried. I think the big question is to what extent will they decide to pull back?

DeVescio: The campground industry is a little insulated because it is affordable.

Rose: The trend (of visitors delaying booking trips) started last year and part of the year before, where the booking window got shorter and shorter. You're going to see the booking pace being even shorter than years past. For a hotel, of course, if you're sitting there with empty rooms three weeks from now, you're kind of looking at that, and you're panicking. They're filling up Friday, Saturday and Sunday, so they're going to have to look at what they can do to generate traffic and generate overnight stays during midweek. The private hotel owners are pretty versatile, and they'll come up with solutions for that.

Looking into the future, are there new challenges/new opportunities to consider in 2025?

DeVescio: We're seeing that our demographics are starting to skew younger. We need to make sure that the experience that they're looking for is one that they're going to want to continue to have as they move forward. The average age (of a campground visitor) has dropped by 15 years.

Anthony: In Atlantic City, I think that beautification is a challenge and an opportunity. We have had beach replenishment. We've had road repaving. We have a banner program on Pacific Avenue. Different properties are updating their facades. I think that's really important.

Rose: We've gone from a 10-week season basically to a nine-month season in the Wildwoods, starting in early March with major events in the Convention Center going straight through to November. And now we have a complete program of holiday events, and we take advantage of all the second homeowners that are in Cape May County.

Cooke: We might actually be in this kind of relatively sweet spot before (economic policy shifts) really start to have an impact, which I'm guessing is probably happening later in the fall. Prices don't just pop up overnight. This takes a long time for this stuff to kind of leak in.

PHOTO (Credit: Stacey Clapp/Stockton University)

From left, Jane Bokunewicz, faculty director of the Lloyd D. Levenson Institute of Gaming, Hospitality and Tourism (LIGHT) at the Stockton University School of Business; Nicholas Huba, digital editor at The Press of Atlantic City; Karina Anthony, executive director of marketing at Visit Atlantic City; Oliver Cooke, associate professor of Economics at Stockton and editor of the South Jersey Economic Review; Joann DeVescio, executive director of New Jersey Campground Owners and Outdoor Lodging Association and Ben Rose, director of marketing and public relations, Greater Wildwoods Tourism Authority.

The panel took part in LIGHT's annual Jersey Shorecast discussion at the Stockton University Atlantic City John F. Scarpa Academic Center

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