

LIGHT Jersey Shoreview Panel: Summer of 2025 Successful But Future is Uncertain

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Atlantic City, N.J. — Overall, the summer of 2025 was positive for South Jersey businesses, especially the Atlantic City casinos, but some economic uncertainty clouds the future, according to a group of panelists at the sixth annual Jersey Shoreview at Stockton University.

The Lloyd D. Levenson Institute of Gaming, Hospitality and Tourism (LIGHT) at Stockton's School of Business hosted the panel Oct. 9 at the John F. Scarpa Academic Center and it was streamed online.

LIGHT Faculty Director Jane Bokunewicz opened the discussion, which was moderated by Press of Atlantic City Digital Editor Nicholas Huba.

This year's panelists included:

- Oliver Cooke, associate professor of Economics at Stockton University and editor of the South Jersey Economic Review
- Mary Moliver, executive director of Destination Services at Visit Atlantic City
- Ben Rose, director of Market and Media Relations for the Greater Wildwood Tourism Authority
- Feras Shawi, the owner of Brewberry Café in Atlantic City

Bokunewicz began the discussion by presenting encouraging numbers from the Atlantic City casino industry, including how total gross gaming revenue hit \$1.73 billion, a 15.4% increase year-over-year, and how brick-and-mortar gross gaming revenue, or the amount of money spent physically at casinos, hit \$855 million, a 5.5% increase year-over-year.

The total number of vehicles to pass through the Atlantic City Expressway's Pleasantville Toll Plaza hit 5.53 million, a 0.6% increase over 2024, but the average total casino employment for the summer was 23,353, down 2.9% from 2024.

"It's unclear if that's because of economic efficiency or because of the difficulty in finding employees for the industry," Bokunewicz said.

Finally, she mentioned that it was a great summer for meetings and conventions with 15 shows, a 150% increase over 2024, and \$17.7 million in delegate spending, a 41% increase.

Here are select responses from the panel to prepared questions:

How did the summer go for each of you, and what are your overall thoughts on it?

Ben Rose: We're kind of waiting for state numbers right now. We don't have July and August tax numbers yet. June was a very wet month. But July and August look like they were very strong months and our second season in September looked very strong. So, we are looking at a fairly good summer, not a great summer because of weather and we are looking to meet or exceed last year's record-breaking numbers.

Mary Moliver: This summer did take a rebound from a disappointing June. From a meeting standpoint, the convention center was full, and year over year our numbers were up, so we are very happy with that.

Feras Shawi: It was a good summer. I saw more foot traffic. I saw families and kids coming in.

Rose: People are spending less money now, and I think the economy has gotten them to really cut back on their vacations. We've seen a trend for bookings closer to the time of departure. I think the average booking window right now is 16 days, and that's very unusual. The average length of stay is 2.7 days in Wildwood right now and that's a major change from before.

Oliver Cooke: We definitely saw a job market nationally that was a lot softer than I think a lot of people thought. I think people are naturally starting to pull back. We discussed last spring uncertainty weighing on the economy. Tariffs are involved. I think there are a lot of other things that are involved that make it just more difficult for people to know three or six months out what their own lives are going to look like, what their own businesses are going to look like.

How has the economy impacted your businesses? Are you noticing people spending less?

Shawi: Yes, I have noticed a lot of changes in spending. People are spending less. After the tariffs, we have had to raise our prices. For me, as a business owner, to get more customers, I've had to run more promotions and offers for the customers to be able to afford. People used to come buy two or three items. This summer, they only bought one item because of the prices. Most of our products are imported from either Europe or Mexico.

One of the things that returned this year was an air show to Atlantic City and also the introduction of one to Wildwood. How important are air shows to shore communities?

Moliver: In our opinion it was highly successful. This was a different type of air show. It was more of a civilian air show. It drove over 150,000 people on a Tuesday and Wednesday putting \$19 million into the economy of the city. We do have dates on hold for 2026 and 2027. In 2026, we are moving it from July to May.

Rose: It ties into our main goal of extending the season. We decided to have it in September on a weekend that really didn't have a major event. And it did very, very well. It drew close to 150,000 people over two days, but more importantly it had an economic impact of over \$36 million in business to the communities. We have over 8,000 hotel rooms and most of them were sold out for the two days.

There was a lot of talk at the start of the year regarding President Trump's policies on immigration. We know that Canadian visitors are a huge part of Cape May County's tourism. How impactful were those policies on the Canadian population?

Rose: It actually came out to be about a 60% decrease in the number of Canadian visitors. What we did is we increased our marketing to the Latino family market. That was a major marketing push for us.

What is the biggest issue as we move forward to next summer season of 2026?

Cooke: Looking out the next 6 to 9 months, I think the direction of the economy is going to be huge. I think inflationary pressures are slowly building. I think that's a big wild card. To what extent does inflation really start to bite? Unemployment is definitely starting to slowly trend up. The actual unemployment rate here in the region is already a couple of points north of what the state's is. The state is hovering around 5 and we're closer to 7 here.

PHOTOS (Credit: Mark Melhorn, Stockton University)

Shoreview1: From left, LIGHT Faculty Director Jane Bokunewicz; Nicholas Huba, digital editor at The Press of Atlantic City; Oliver Cooke, associate professor of Economics at Stockton University and editor of the South Jersey Economic Review; Mary Moliver, executive director of Destination Services at Visit Atlantic City; Ben Rose, director of Market and Media Relations for the Greater Wildwood Tourism Authority; Feras Shawi, the owner of Brewberry Café in Atlantic City. The group led the sixth annual Jersey Shoreview panel discussion in Atlantic City on Oct. 9.

Shoreview2: Jane Bokunewicz, faculty director of the Lloyd D. Levenson Institute of Gaming, Hospitality and Tourism (LIGHT) at Stockton University.

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Stockton University

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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.