

Heavy-hitters of casino industry headline Atlantic City gaming conference

DAVID DANZIS Staff Writer

ATLANTIC CITY — The landscape of casino gaming is ever-changing and several titans of the industry will be in town next week to discuss all the hot-button issues during a two-day conference.

The 23rd annual East Coast Gaming Congress and NextGen Gaming Forum starts Wednesday and runs through Thursday at Harrah's Waterfront Conference Center. This year's keynote speakers at Atlantic City's only gaming conference are Gov. Phil Murphy and Bill Miller, the new president and CEO of the American Gaming Association.

Among the topics that are expected to generate significant discussion are the U.S. Department of Justice's recent opinion on the Wire Act, the national impact of legalized sports betting, the evolution of e-sports and casino gaming expansion, the event's organizers said.

Several high-ranking gaming executives are scheduled to participate in panel discussions, including: David Cordish, CEO and chairman of the Cordish Company; Mario Kontomerkos, CEO of Mohegan Gaming and Entertainment; George Papanier, CEO of Twin River; Thomas Reeg, CEO of Eldorado Resorts; Timothy Wilmott, CEO of Penn National Gaming; and Greg Carlin, CEO of Rush Street Gaming.

"The East Coast Gaming Congress is set up to be significantly different from other gaming conferences," said Michael Pollock, co-founder of the conference and managing director of Spectrum Gaming Group. "It's designed to bring in decision makers to speak to an audience who are decision makers in their own right."

Murphy is returning to ECGC in 2019 after delivering the keynote address at last year's conference.

"(The governor is) very interested in the industry, in general," said Lloyd D. Levenson, co-founder of ECGC and CEO of Cooper Levenson LLC. "He's interested in the area, not only just the Atlantic City gaming industry, but in South Jersey tourism. We're excited that he thinks enough of the ECGC to come back and be our keynote speaker again."

The 2018 ECGC coincided with the launch of legalized sports betting in New Jersey. Following his keynote speech last year, Murphy — who placed the first legal sports wager in New Jersey at Monmouth Park Racetrack on June 14 — went to Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa to place a bet.

Sports betting has provided Atlantic City casinos with a new source of revenue and created excitement in the resort. Statewide, more than \$2 billion has been wagered on collegiate and professional sports in the year since Murphy signed legislation to tax and regulate the gaming amenity.

The ECGC will feature a panel with CEOs from some of the largest sports wagering providers.

"I would challenge any conference to match up with the session we have on sports wagering," Levenson said.

Several of the panels will lend themselves to high-profile discussions, Levenson said, including the DOJ's new interpretation of the Interstate Wire Act of 1961, which a federal court vacated Monday.

The most recent opinion of the Wire Act, released in January, suggested that the law applies to all forms of online gambling, including casino games, sports betting and lotteries, and is in direct contrast to a 2011 Justice Department opinion that the New Jersey Legislature relied on before legalizing internet wagering in 2013. Monday's court opinion stated that the Wire Act only applies to sports betting.

The opinion indicated federal prosecutors could bring criminal charges against individuals or companies that offered online gaming services, even in states where the practice was legal.

"An opinion like this rattles our industry," Levenson said. "Any kind of opinion — we'll call it a negative opinion — coming out of the Department of Justice has to have an impact on any industry. And the gaming industry is no exception."

The first day of ECGC will feature a panel on the future of e-sports, which many industry experts are anticipating will be the new wave of casino gaming because of its appeal to Millennials.