

# **Pandemic's impact on South Jersey tourism, hospitality will continue in 2021, experts say, but that may not be a negative**

David Danzis

The coronavirus pandemic disrupted the tourism and hospitality industries in 2020 and, barring a medical miracle, will likely continue to do so in 2021.

But not all of the COVID-19 related changes are a bad thing, according to experts who participated in the Jersey Shoreview: Fall Tourism and Business Panel Discussion on Thursday hosted by the Lloyd D. Levenson Institute of Gaming, Hospitality & Tourism at Stockton University.

Enhanced safety protocols, operational efficiencies, new technology and expanded outdoor dining options are all adjustments borne out of the business community's response to the virus but are probably going to stick around for the foreseeable future.

"I think a lot of these things that we're implementing will be here to stay," said Jim Ziereis, vice president of hotel sales in the Atlantic City region for Caesars Entertainment Inc.

Michael Brennan, executive chef at Josie Kelly's Public House in Somers Point, said cleaning and sanitation will continue to be priorities going forward for food and beverage establishments. The focus on clean and safe, and the perception of those standards by the public, will significantly impact bars and restaurants in the less-busy fall and winter months at the Jersey Shore as customers move back inside, he said.

"But I also think that outdoor dining is going to become one of the new norms, for South Jersey in particular," Brennan said, noting that owners and operators made significant investments in accommodating al fresco dining and takeout service, meaning they are more likely to stick with those practices to complement traditional operations.

South Jersey also presented itself as an attractive place to live during the pandemic, as people left crowded metropolitan regions for more space or second-home owners retreated to the shore. The result has been an increase, albeit slight, in the year-round populations in certain municipalities in Atlantic and Cape May counties.

"We are seeing a large number of people show a greater interest in just being here, whether they're renting or they're looking to purchase homes," said Vicki Clark, president of the Cape May County Chamber of Commerce. "We saw, from the very beginning, people coming and staying in their second homes, and people also looking to rent and to be here to get out of the cities. They saw Cape May County as a safer place to be."

Ultimately, the successes or challenges experienced by the tourism and hospitality industries in South Jersey for the rest of 2020 and entering 2021 will depend on factors outside the control of those sectors, said Oliver Cooke, associate professor of economics at Stockton.

"At the end of the day, it's going to be the consumer who probably decides how this all shakes out," Cooke said. "It's going to be largely this (dynamic) between folks that really feel comfortable in a variety of situations, whether it be in an airplane or a restaurant or a casino floor, versus those who kind of hold back. I think it's hard to say which way that goes."

Cooke added that "a lot of it also has to do with what happens with the actual virus itself which, of course, is living its own life independently of what human beings are doing."