

## South Jersey's tourism outlook? Sunny, as long it doesn't rain, experts say

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Tourism and business experts are optimistic about the upcoming summer season although some were cautious about overstating their enthusiasm, particularly in light of weather and economic conditions.

“If I were a business person, I would be cautiously optimistic about that but be prepared in case things do slow down a little bit,” said Michael Busler, assistant professor for the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at The Richard Stockton College.



Busler was among the panelist at today’s fourth annual Jersey Shorecast in Atlantic City, which brought together tourism officials and scholars to give their insight into the upcoming summer season.

“This year, by all accounts we’re set up for a banner yet, weather permitting,” Fran Goldstein, a commercial banker, said. “Whether it is enough to sustain us through the winter...that’s another thing.”

Hurricane Irene was a huge factor in bringing down profits last year, panelists said.

The unemployment rate, which remains in double digits in South Jersey, needs to improve before any substantial recovery occurs.

“If people are working and earning income that is really what is going to drive tourism,” Busler said.

Gas prices also are on their way down, though the trend appears to have little impact on tourism profitability, he said.

“We’re not quite sure what the relationship is between gas prices and tourism activity,” Busler said. “Even if they are at \$3.50, which is historically a high price because we were looking at \$3.90...the trend is downward, which should be positive.”

In addition, Joe Kelly, president of the Greater Atlantic City Chamber of Commerce, said the region must think globally rather than focus exclusively on the summer season.

“We’re bullish about the summer season because we’re always bullish about the summer season,” he said. “Summer is always great. Let’s start talking about September and who’s coming to town.”

The region also must come to grips that casino gambling will rebound but never reach the heights it has in the past, Kelly said.

“Gaming is never going to be what it used to be,” he said, adding that tourism should be measured on other factors rather than just gambling revenue. “It’s time we start measuring based on other indicators other than one thing.”

Kelly said he believes tourists don’t see the regional boundaries that locals typically impose on the area.

“Move your boundaries beyond Atlantic City,” he said. “The customer doesn’t care. The customer cares about how I can come into the area and have a lot of fun...we got to start thinking like the customer.”

At the same time, the tourism market is somewhat segregated and some areas of downbeach and South Jersey are viewed more as family destinations than Atlantic City, Busler said, adding that he believed the south shore would likely be in a good position this summer given decreases in unemployment and slight increases in income.

“Outside of Atlantic City, I think the season is going to be a lot stronger,” he said. “For the last couple of years, people haven’t been doing as much vacation as they would like and now they are starting to feel better.”