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## Jersey Shore forecast places hope in day-trippers

By Beth Fitzgerald

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Day-tripping visitors to Jersey Shore resorts are essential for the region to weather the current economic crisis, according to the annual "Jersey Shorecast" presented this week by Stockton College's William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy.

A poll conducted by Monmouth University found families are 7 percent more likely to be shore visitors this year than last, said **Sharon Schulman**, executive director of the Hughes Center, which hosted the event. "The poll also indicated a 9 percent increase in families with children planning on taking more day trips or short stays than last year," she said.

Shorecast participants included Norris Clark, of Morey's Piers in Wildwood; Oliver Cooke, a Stockton economics professor who authors "The South Jersey Economic Review"; Mary Herman, of Keller Williams Realty; Mark Kramer, of Kramer Beverage; and Joseph Weinert, of Spectrum Gaming Group.

Highlights from Cooke included the loss of 14,000 shore-area jobs — coupled with a 20 percent downturn in construction — a 5 percent drop in retail employment and an overall unemployment rate of 11 percent. He forecast a weakened job market continuing for the next several quarters.

Herman said the region's housing market shows no near-term sign of recovery.

"Many foreclosures are coming due in June, we are seeing loan modifications, short sales and people unable to put together a down payment," she said.

Weinert said Atlantic City's casino industry has seen a significant drop in gross revenue, with increased competition hurting the industry more than the economy. "With the opening of casinos in Pennsylvania, table games and sports betting in Delaware, new casinos in the Catskill Mountains, and Indian gaming properties nearby, regional competition is the real problem. The days of Atlantic City being convenient to its market are over. Atlantic City needs to decide what it wants to be."

Clark said day-trippers would continue to be a huge target market for local businesses — the trick is to get them to come in the first place.

"Having a beach isn't enough," he said. "We are in the business of designing experiences for people. We must constantly find ways to make the Shore experience unique and different."

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