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Summer tourism could be good at Shore in 2012

ATLANTIC CITY — Declining gasoline prices and very modest improvements in employment and consumer confidence could make 2012 a very good summer for the Shore's tourism business, after a promising 2011 season that was cut short by Hurricane Irene, experts said at a panel discussion hosted by Richard Stockton College.

But the southern Shore can no longer rely on the Atlantic City casinos to drive growth, and continued diversification in entertainment, dining and retail are key to keeping the region healthy as a favored travel destination, they stressed during the session at the college's Carnegie Center.

"We have to stop judging this region by one measure...Gaming is not going to be what it was," said Joseph D. Kelly, president of the Greater Atlantic City Chamber of Commerce, referring to prolonged slides in the gaming industry's numbers.

Meanwhile, other measures of visitor

re seeing," Tyrrell said. The hotel and casino website www.atlanticcity.com has counted visitors up 38 percent this spring compared to the previous 12-month period in 2010-2011. There's been a 27 percent surge year to date in its web traffic, with 69 percent of those first-time inquires, he said.

Promising signals are coming from Long Beach Island, where "the trend for hotel bookings for private events is through the roof," said Lori Pepenella, director of destination marketing for the Southern Ocean County Chamber of Commerce.

"Visitor spending was up 7 percent in 2011 and everything looks like it will be going higher this year," Pepenella said.

The new "Do AC" advertising campaign will have broad benefits to Atlantic, Ocean and Cape May counties, and "I think what we're going to see is an increase in all those metrics, which is a sign of a healthy destination," said Jeffrey S. Vasser, president of the Atlantic City Convention

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interest are up, said Brian Tyrrell, associate professor of hospitality and tourism studies at Stockton. He said he takes issue with news media reports that use gaming numbers to illustrate decline.

“People are traveling again, that’s what we’



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and Visitors Authority.

Hurricane Irene came so close to the end of the 2011 season “that a lot of people prematurely ended their summer vacation,” Vasser said.

Losing that week and by extension much of Labor Day weekend upended cash flow projections for Shore businesses, noted Fran Goldstein, a longtime commercial banker in the region. Still, 2011 could be counted as “a banner year” before that ending, she added.

It was a season of continued recovery from the recession as measured by one indicator, hotel occupancy taxes, Vasser said.

After a “brutal” 2009, hotel tax collections jumped 10 percent in 2010, and 7 percent in 2011, Vasser said. This year, financial services company PricewaterhouseCoopers is forecasting a 6.25 percent in hotel room revenues nationally, he said.

The national economy offers mixed indicators, with a slowing growth rate this spring but gasoline prices apparently past their peak for the year, said Michael Busler, an assistant professor of finance at the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy.

a fall of 18 to 20 cents from the peak this year.

The economy slowed growth this spring to just more than 2 percent, Busler said. On the positive side, he added: “There are 1 million more people working this summer.”

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“The news is mostly good on gas prices... the trend is gas prices are likely to fall further,” Busler said. Prices at about \$3.50 a gallon in southern New Jersey will be historically high, Busler said, but represent



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Jeffrey S. Vasser, president of the Atlantic City Convention and Visitors Authority, speaks during Friday's annual Shore tourism forecast hosted by Richard Stockton College. / Kirk Moore/staff photo

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