



# ATLANTIC CITY CASINOS' FUTURE: THE MAYORAL TOPIC THAT DIDN'T BARK

BY JOHN BRENNAN ON OCT 19, 2020

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Ever since Pennsylvania and New York opened casinos and racinos in 2006, the future of Atlantic City's casino industry has been at or near the top of the city's concerns.

So it was remarkable that in a recent one-hour debate between incumbent Mayor Marty Small and Republican challenger Tom Forkin, the topic of the casinos' long-term health was not broached by moderator David Danzis, a reporter for The Press of Atlantic City.

Part of the reason for the omission was the city has so many pressing issues, but it also reflects how Atlantic City casinos are not hemorrhaging money in spite of a worldwide pandemic.

Total revenue for the casinos in August and September of 2019, according to the state Division of Gaming Enforcement, was \$656.3 million.

In the same two months this year, that figure was virtually unchanged at \$649.6 million.

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There are concerns, of course, in that thousands of jobs have been lost at the brick-and-mortar facilities. Much of the casino revenue has transitioned [from those sites to online casino play](#) that requires far less manpower.

But that issue pales in comparison to the disaster that was 2014, when [four of Atlantic City's 12 casinos](#) closed in the same calendar year.

The Atlantic Club, Showboat, Revel, and Trump Plaza shuttered that year, [followed two years later](#) by Trump Taj Mahal for a combined loss of tens of thousands of jobs, seemingly permanently.

But the Trump Taj Mahal reopened in mid-2018 as Hard Rock Casino, while Revel has been reborn as Ocean Casino Resort. And despite concerns about slicing the casino revenue pie nine ways instead of seven, the industry appears to be relatively stable.

So the recent debate in the mayoral race — which will come to a vote Nov. 3 to fill the final year of [indicted mayor Frank Gilliam's](#) term — turned instead to other topics.

## Think Small — or think Forkin?

The debate at Stockton University's campus — minus an audience, due to COVID-19 concerns — focused heavily on residents' tax burdens and public safety.

The closest allusion to the casinos came in Forkin's call for a greater share of casino hotel taxes to be retained by the city.

Small stressed that he was "Atlantic City born and bred," and that he would die there as well. He took repeated jabs at Forkin not being an Atlantic City homeowner, suggesting that left him out of touch with the concerns of many voters.

Forkin pointed to his service under the late and popular ex-Mayor Jim Whelan, and he claimed that city property was being directed to "campaign contributors and Wall Street hedge funds."

Small stressed that unlike some Democrats who have talked of "defunding the police," he is for increasing such funding.

But Forkin, in advocating for more state funding for the tourism destination's police force, said that drug users' heavy presence on Pacific Avenue means that the street "looks like Zombieland."

The tone got personal at times, with Small calling Forkin "delusional" and twice referring to the fact that Forkin, who has a law degree, [had been disbarred](#).

Forkin said that in life there are "show horses and workhorses," while referring to himself as the latter.

Both men expressed their support for a marijuana legalization ballot question that will go to voters statewide next month, with Small adding that he was personally opposed to marijuana and that he had never smoked it. But he said passage would provide the city with much-needed revenue.

The men also sparred over the level of occupancy at the new 600 NoBe at North Beach apartment community, which includes luxury housing.

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