

Strong shoulder season helps offset tourism losses

CAPE MAY COURT HOUSE — A strong end of summer and early fall lift in visitors to the Cape May County has helped offset the lodging revenue losses due to the pandemic shut down in March, April and May.

April losses were 99 percent compared to April 2019, generating slightly more than \$3,000 for the month. Hotels and motels opening to full capacity in July started the increase in occupancy tax collection. The county's occupancy tax rate exceeded all other counties in both August and September with a combined total of more than \$5 million collected and 80 percent of the year-to-date amount. Overall, as of Sept. 30, tourism revenue is down 24.7 percent over the same time

period in 2019.

The latest occupancy tax data released by the New Jersey Treasury shows August numbers to be 7.5 percent under the rate collected in 2019. However, September data exceeded expectations and came in at 17.3 percent over the same period in 2019. This represents an increase of \$247,416 and is 5 percent of the room rate. The county has not seen an increase in monthly occupancy tax collections since February 2020.

The occupancy tax data is posted monthly and used as a benchmark to measure overnight stays in hotels, motels and bed and breakfast inns. Based on the Department of Tourism's annual survey, the average overnight visitor spends

\$374 per day, spread over all sectors, and affects food and beverage, retail, recreation and transportation.

"We knew by the size of the crowds, August and September were busy months, but we did not expect to see September numbers exceed last year. The summer season started at 46 percent below last year and we have been able to bridge the gap by almost half. While this is encouraging, we still have segments of the industry that are having difficulty recovering from the shutdown and subsequent restrictions. Restaurants have been the hardest-hit, and we are still dealing with reduced capacity. Many cannot continue to operate much longer with 25 percent indoor capacity and colder weather will curtail

most outdoor dining," said Freeholder Director Gerald M. Thornton, liaison to the Department of Tourism.

Short-term rentals are booming with some real estate agents reporting double and triple the number of rentals this time last year. Remote work and virtual learning are keeping seasonal homeowners in the county during the fall and into the winter months. Home sales are reaching record numbers among beach counties and Cape May County is part of the boon in sales. These new homeowners along with seasonal homeowners will support local businesses and attractions.

"Cape May County has topped all other counties in New Jersey in August with \$3.3 million gener-

ated in occupancy tax collection. In September, we were the only county that generated more than \$1 million with \$1.67 million collected. Visitor behavior during the pandemic has changed the dynamics of the traditional vacation season and has created a new visitor looking for non-beach experiences. Our diverse assets that include eco- and agri-tourism activities give residents and visitors the opportunity to be safe outside with room to social distance," county Tourism Director Diane Wieland said.

"It is our hope that the vaccine will turn things around quickly and we can go back to some semblance of a healthy tourism industry. While we are showing signs of recovery, the im-

act of losing \$1 in every \$4 generated last year is huge. With the balance of the year looking promising, any loss of tourism revenue is devastating to our small businesses in Cape May County," Thornton added.

The county launched a confidence campaign in April promoting the outdoors and open spaces with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention restrictions clearly part of the message. This was coupled with a dedicated safety campaign called "Safely Together" that featured television, print, radio and social media reminders to follow protocols while visiting the county. Cape May County COVID-19 cases were among the lowest compared to other areas in the state and region.

Flooding in West Cape May

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up into Wilbraham Park where inline check valves will be installed.

"We know what the problem is and it's all interconnected," Roberts said.

He said the borough received a complaint about flooding at State Street and Fourth Street, which is the upper end of the whole system.

"There is no simple fix here," Roberts said, noting

approvals from the Department of Environmental Protection "would be necessary to anything we'd do."

The flooding problems boils down to the capacity of the Cape Meadows, he said. Mayor Carol Sabo said the

borough has come up with stop-gap remediation measures such as requiring new construction to present a grading plan of the property. "That helps in moving water, but it has to go somewhere," she said.

Even with "ethical development," water still has to be displaced, Sabo said.

Roberts said the area from Broadway to Bayshore Road up to Sixth Avenue drains into the meadows. From Bayshore Road to Cape May Point, all the drainage also goes into meadows, located between Sunset Boulevard and the beach on the Nature Conservancy property.

"It would take a major watershed-management plan to go over this to determine what can be done to solve all these problems," he said. "You can't just solve one because it's just going to impact something downstream of it."

Sabo said the issue was not just a borough issue but a county and state response.

Deputy Mayor Peter Burke said the DEP under Gov. Chris Christie in his second term, changed the rules for building in coastal counties.

"Land that was not allowed to be built on and where people were fined for doing things on that property was all of a sudden allowed to be built on," he said. "And it has exasperated big time the building in West Cape May."

Roberts said storm water management plans for homesites approved by the borough exceeded those standards, it could face lawsuits from developers.

Commissioner John Francis III suggested a borough master plan for drainage to meet future demand.

Sabo said the crux of the problem was "there was no place for the water to go." Roberts said while the borough could have a master storm drain system plan, it would still rely on the management of the meadows

and the management of the culvert that goes through the city of Cape May.

"You're talking about all this area (water) going through a 60-inch pipe that's underground within inches of buildings in Cape May and that was put in 80 years ago," he said.

In order to replace the 60-inch pipe with a larger pipe, houses on either side of the culvert would need to be purchased from Perry Street to Grant Street, Roberts said.

When you are looking at the area that it drains, it's impossible for all that water to go through that pipe, Roberts said. The alternative is to turn the meadows into a large water storage area to allow more water to accumulate there until the tide goes down and the gate valve on the 60-inch pipe opens up, he said.

"If you keep putting water there, you're going to end up disrupting that whole ecosystem," Sabo said.

Burke said a weir on the Nature Conservancy property is controlled by adding and subtracting planks in a gate and is not always manned. Hawthorn said while walking through the Nature Conservancy property, she sometimes finds it "bone dry" or the water level is very low, yet she has water in her backyard.

"I don't see the harm of having more water sitting there for that wildlife at some point," she said.

Francis said in the past, more water was being held on the Nature Conservancy property. Sabo said the borough has experience unprecedented new construction in the past five years, over 60 new homes.

Roberts said he was shocked by where DEP was allowing homes to be constructed.

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Andy Boyt Fund backs food bank

CAPE MAY — RE/MAX at the Shore donated \$1,500 to the Andy Boyt Memorial Fund and earmarked it for the Cape May Food Bank.

The Memorial Fund matched the gift and made a \$3,000 donation Dec. 10 to the food bank.

The fund is also donating \$10,000 to the Fallen Firefighters Fund, the largest donation to the fund in the history of the Andy Boyt Memorial Fund.

This year was the 10th anniversary of the fund and despite the limitations placed on social gathering and the ability to raise funds, the Andy Boyt Memorial Fund is committed to continue to support the Fallen Firefighters Fund, organizations and individuals in the local community in need. The fund's annual Paddle Out was canceled this year due to bad weather and social distancing concerns.



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