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Prince Meets Jersey Shore Gearing Up for Season Post-Sandy: Jobs

Michelle Jamrisko
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After the biggest Atlantic storm on record struck the New Jersey shore last October, Seaside Heights Mayor William Akers was asked repeatedly if the town would rebuild in time to welcome summer tourists. “Oh, no problem,” he’d reply.

“The truth of the matter,” he says now, “is I had no idea.”

So for Akers it comes as a relief, six months after superstorm Sandy slammed into his 100-year-old borough, to see signs of a revival along his part of the Jersey shore. Rental property owners, boardwalk vendors and the municipality’s beach managers are planning to hire just as much summer help as they did last year. Local officials say a visit by Britain’s Prince Harry today -- ahead of the traditional Memorial Day kick-off of the beach season -- may help boost awareness that the Jersey shore is open for business.

“Not being open would be fatal to Seaside Heights,” said Akers, 57.

A comeback for the Jersey shore is critical for a state where tourism accounted for 10 percent of employment last year. New Jersey’s jobless rate of 9 percent in March stood above the national rate of 7.6 percent at the time. The tourism jobs reinforce an improving labor market for New Jersey, which has added about 3,300 construction jobs since the storm, with increases in four out of the five months through March.

Augmenting Growth

Rebuilding after Sandy could add 0.4 percentage point to U.S. growth this year, making up more than half the 0.75 percentage point that construction will add to gross domestic product, said **Bernard Baumohl, chief global economist at Economic Outlook Group LLC**, a Princeton, New Jersey-based forecasting firm.

“While the destruction has been a detriment to some, it’s been a boom for others,” Akers said.

In Seaside Heights, the images Akers recalls from a nighttime tour of his borough in a military vehicle -- floating cars and a house washed into the middle of the street -- have been replaced by the scene of workers laying the final planks on the fresh mile-long boardwalk.

The progress might be the payoff from better preparation for natural disasters in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, said Kathleen Tierney, director of the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

“There was a real effort to put resources into the Sandy- affected areas not only after impact but repositioning things before impact and already starting to think about recovery,” Tierney said.

Harry’s Visit

Akers is looking forward to showing off the improvement as the prince visits Seaside Heights, part of a week-long U.S. tour that also includes stops in Washington, Colorado and New York. New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, who is seeking a second term in November as he enjoys a rise in approval levels in the wake of Sandy, will accompany the prince on his visit to the state.

A return to normal levels of beach hiring may help put a lid on the state’s teenage unemployment rate. New Jersey’s 26.9 percent teenage unemployment rate is the seventh-highest among the states, according to data from the U.S. government’s Current Population Survey.

Diane Martinez, who manages hiring for Seaside Heights Beach Control, plans to employ the usual staff of 35, mostly high-school and college-aged, tending booths along the beach this year. About 10 who held booth jobs last year were forced from their homes by the storm and won’t be returning this summer, she said. Their positions will be filled from applicants who turned out at a local job fair, she said.

Lifeguard Duty

Across Barnegat Bay in Toms River, Business Administrator Paul Shives said fewer lifeguards are needed this year because less of the beach area will be available to visitors. Still, “like everyone else, we’re hedging our bets” and asking individuals to be ready for a call to lifeguard duty, he said.

Michael Loundy, a real estate broker who owns at least 50 properties and manages at least 200, including the house featured in MTV’s “Jersey Shore” television show, said “it’s a win” that he hasn’t had to reduce the headcount at

his business. Seaside Realty will maintain eight full-time agents and an additional six to 10 summer employees this year, said Loundy, 52.

For Greg Kohr, who owns four ice-cream stands along the Seaside Heights boardwalk and whose family business dates to 1919, hiring has shifted instead of disappeared. While three of his stands won't be open at the start of the summer, two stores he's opening in neighboring Ortley Beach and elsewhere in Seaside Heights may replace the lost jobs.

Jobs Stable

In Belmar, about 18 miles north of Seaside Heights, Mayor Matt Doherty sees a job market that's "stable, if not up a bit" as about 140 businesses in the one-square-mile town are preparing for the crowds. Summer tourism accounts for at least 70 percent of the local economy, Doherty said.

"It's a very delicate economic ecosystem in a town like ours and any town at the Jersey shore, where there are no large corporations," said Doherty, who is also a financial adviser at Investors Bank in New Jersey. "One summer can really be devastating to the financial stability of these businesses."

At the same time, workers on construction projects dotting the edge of the beach in Seaside Heights, about 80 miles from New York City, are part of a contracting boom in the region. The influx of workers has kept up demand at the 7-Eleven two blocks from the boardwalk, said Vish Raval, the store's manager.

Plumbers, electricians, drywall installers, painters, roofers and landscapers are among the trades struggling to keep up with orders along the Jersey shore, said Michele Gillian, executive director of the 575-member Chamber of Commerce in Ocean City, about 60 miles south of Seaside Heights.

Restaurants Busy

"If you know a contractor, it's like asking a favor right now," Gillian said. The rise in contract work has boosted demand at local restaurants, which saw more business than usual in the colder months that followed Sandy, she said.

Mike Collins, owner of the 30-year-old Collins Land Surveying based in Bayville, said this year has probably been the busiest in the company's existence as residents call on his six-member team to assess what repairs are needed to damaged property, including piers and businesses on the Seaside Heights boardwalk. The demand since the storm led Collins to add one employee to his staff.

For the next few months, Jersey shore business owners and city officials said, crowds that bolster the more permanent businesses will depend on the weather.

“It’s really simple down here, the formula -- if you get the sun, you get the people,” Akers said.

Hurricane Season

An above-average hurricane season is expected this year, with 18 named storms compared with the 30-year average of 12, researchers at Colorado State University said April 10.

While rain could spoil business along the beach, the crowds are usually driven to shop elsewhere in the area, said Michael Guarino, owner of Michael’s Furniture in Brick, New Jersey.

Guarino told Bloomberg News in December that he’d at first thought the storm might threaten his third-generation family business. Instead, his fourth-quarter results were the best in the store’s history as residents arrived to refurnish their damaged homes and take advantage of his discounts for storm victims.

The crowds have kept coming, even during the usually slow months of April and May, and have increased orders. Guarino has doubled his staff to 30 from 15 since the storm and plans to add five more employees to keep up with the current level of demand. With four packed-to-capacity warehouses, he decided to find an additional property for a small outlet store attached to a fifth storage center.

“This year I have no idea what to expect because nothing is normal,” he said.