

Poll respondents say Atlantic City's best days are behind it - pressofAtlanticCity.com: Atlantic City | Pleasantville | Brigantine

By DEREK HARPER Staff Writer | October 22, 2014

Paging Bruce Springsteen: Everything may die, baby, that's a fact; but a new Rutgers-Eagleton poll found that a solid majority of state residents think Atlantic City's not coming back.

Instead, the poll released Wednesday afternoon found 63 percent of state residents think the best days of the place once called "America's Playground" are behind it. It found 43 percent of those polled visited over the past 12 months, while just 35 percent planned to do so over the next 12 months.

"The early days of gambling prompted some optimism that the industry would make Atlantic City a major resort destination," said David Redlawsk, a Rutgers political science professor and director of the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling.

However, state residents were always cynical of the resort's prospects, he said, adding, "That most now think the city's best days are in the past reflects the recognition of serious problems there."

Beyond sepia-toned memories of diving horses, 2,200-foot-long piers and Frank Sinatra's annual two-week stand at the long-vanished 500 Club, the poll found that most state residents continue to believe that gambling in Atlantic City has benefited only the casinos.

About 63 percent of state residents say the house has been the only winner in the casino era, versus 25 percent who thought casinos and resort residents both benefited. About 71 percent of those polled in 1999 said casinos were the only beneficiary, as did 67 percent in 1986 and 59 percent in 1982.

Throughout the casino era, some have sought to promote nongambling attractions with apparent limited success. Just 25 percent of those polled thought the city was a major convention and resort town, while almost 63 percent thought it was known only for gambling.

When pollsters asked this question 30 years ago, the poll found 40 percent thought it was a convention and resort city, while 47 percent thought it was just a casino city.

Gamblers, however, are more likely to think Atlantic City's best days are ahead of it: 28 percent of frequent gamblers believe so, versus 23 percent of occasional gamblers and 21 percent of nongamblers.

And now, with as many as five casinos closing in the resort this year, the poll found that a small number of state residents are choosing to gamble elsewhere.

About 91 percent of state residents polled have visited the resort, and about half of those have gambled. Almost 40 percent of those gamblers have visited casinos in other states.

However, more than two-thirds of people who have gambled in the resort still say they plan to primarily try their luck in Atlantic City.

"The key seems to be finding a way to make sure gamblers return," Redlawsk said. "Once out of the habit, the evidence is that they will continue to look elsewhere."

The telephone poll was conducted between Sept. 29 and Oct. 5 with a random selection of 842 New Jersey adults with a margin of error of 4.4 percent.

Contact Derek Harper:

609-272-7046

DHarper@pressofac.com

@dnharper on Twitter

