

ISSUE
056

>FOREFRONT

HAS ATLANTIC CITY REACHED THE END?

Casino Profits Are Falling. Sea Levels Are Rising.
What's Next for AC?



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Volume 1, Issue 56.
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Forefront is published weekly by
Next City, a 501c3 nonprofit
that connects cities and the people
working to improve them.

Next City.
2711 West Girard Ave.
Philadelphia, PA 19130

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At night the sleek Revel casino-hotel complex looks like something out of a well-financed science fiction movie, with an eye-like globe shining atop its jet-black tower. The \$2.4 billion construction is the second tallest building in New Jersey. Even during the day it presents an imposing façade, soaring above the rest of Atlantic City. When Hurricane Sandy battered the resort town, Revel easily withstood the winds and rain. The casinos have their own generators and never lost power.

The same cannot be said of UNITE HERE, Local 54's union hall located diagonally across town on a backstreet few tourists ever see. Like the rest of the neighborhood, the low-slung building was hammered by the storm. Local 54 had to abandon its headquarters and relocate to a temporary office on Atlantic Avenue. But reshuffling some offices is nothing compared to the ruin that the hurricane brought to many residents who live a few blocks from the casino strip.

"I lived up here my whole life, but never thought about the high density of basement apartments and first-floor, street-level apartments," says Bob McDevitt, longtime president of Local 54. "We had a really hard-hit group of workers. These people got wiped out. They lost everything. Their furniture, their clothes, everything."

After the storm, national media attention focused on supposed damage to the city's boardwalk (which was minimal) and the political fireworks between New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie and Atlantic City Mayor Lorenzo Langford, who have a history of headline-grabbing rhetorical sparring. This time, Christie denounced Langford as a "rogue mayor" for supposedly ignoring his evacuation orders and the mayor offered, on national television, to debate the governor "*mano-a-mano*." Outside the local press, little attention was paid to what was being done for those who actually had to navigate the flooded streets. A March report from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development shows that Atlantic City **suffered** 5,000 damaged housing units, more than any other municipality in the state.

Although the casinos were largely impervious to the hurricane, the industry itself wasn't in a position to aid its beleaguered employees, let alone other residents. Atlantic City's casino revenues plummeted from a 2006 **peak of \$5.2 billion** to a little more than \$3 billion in 2012, the result of the end of their regional casino monopoly and especially competition from Pennsylvania, which legalized casino gambling in 2006. (The state's annual

gross casino revenue **eclipsed** New Jersey's — where all casinos are concentrated in AC — for the first time in 2012, making it America's second largest gambling market after Nevada.)

So the gaming industry wasn't in a charitable mood after Hurricane Sandy. Only Caesars Entertainment, which owns four of the city's 12 casinos, made a concerted effort to mitigate some of the damage, paying workers 30 hours for a week of work and allowing paid time off to put their lives back together. John Demario of the **Atlantic City Rescue Mission** says the casinos did organize clothing and blanket drives for the many people who lost heat and electricity. But actual assistance work was spearheaded by FEMA, Local 54, The Red Cross and the Diocese of Camden's sponsored Catholic Charities.

Local 54 ran a "Helping Hands Center," with the help of the Red Cross, assisting union members and other residents apply for unemployment insurance, SNAP and other forms of public and charitable assistance as business slowed and work dried up. In the opening days, the line for services wrapped around the block from 8am to 8pm. Despite its impressive façade, Revel was singularly ill placed to help. According to one employee, during the casino's one-week closure workers were only allowed to use whatever earned sick time they had accumulated. The management also established a donation center.

Its ability to withstand Sandy is basically the only break Atlantic City's newest casino got since opening last April. The debt-choked enterprise has failed spectacularly. From **October 2012** through last **February**, Revel won less than \$10 million every month, making it one of the weakest casinos in town. (Winnings are the pre-tax and expenditure take of the casinos, not pure profit.)

"The Revel is very much a joke," declares David Wolf. Standing on the corner of Atlantic and Georgia avenues on a gray Thursday afternoon in January, Wolf says he lost his job at a restaurant in Revel to slow business and his basement apartment to Hurricane Sandy. A tour of the complex that night confirms his impression. A couple aged gamblers sit at the slot machines and a clutch of bachelorettes seem at a loss as to what to do with their evening. About a month after Wolf's denunciation, the company that owns the casino **announced it would file for bankruptcy protection**.

Local 54's headquarters fared poorly in the storm because the distinctly unglamorous hall is far away from the casino strip and subject to the same conditions as



Mayor Langford at his desk in City Hall.

the surrounding neighborhoods. Perhaps that grounded view is why McDevitt foresaw that revitalizing Atlantic City would take more than adding a grander casino to a shrinking gambling market that was already shedding jobs. In 2010 and 2011, as Christie and Democratic legislators prepared to offer the half-built Revel a massive state tax credit to finish construction, McDevitt was one of the lone voices decrying the deal. Local 54's only ally was the New Jersey branch of Americans for Prosperity, a deeply conservative political organization. Both groups **took a similar line**: Private investors had pulled out of Revel (Morgan Stanley put **\$1.2 billion** into the property before exiting), a clear signal that the market couldn't bear another casino. Despite Revel's promise of non-gaming entertainment and a classier atmosphere, it was still a mammoth casino-hotel complex in a town already saturated with the same. Christie and the Democratic legislature provided \$261.4 million in state tax reimbursements anyway.

TALE OF TWO CITIES

Slow business in Atlantic City has ripple effects throughout the state, hence Christie's commitment to the ailing resort. New Jersey's 1976 law legalizing casino gambling ensured that 8 percent of the casinos' yearly gross receipts are **earmarked** to offset utilities and property taxes

for elderly and disabled residents. A 1984 law created the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority (CRDA) and required casinos to pay 1.25 percent of their annual gross receipts to the agency for redevelopment of Atlantic City and other struggling areas of the state. Like most states, New Jersey is facing persistent budgetary issues in the wake of the Great Recession. Every revenue stream matters.

Shortly after taking office in 2010, Christie **declared** Atlantic City "a dying city." But as he stood on the Boardwalk, surrounded by the mayor and members of the City Council, he paired his morbid assessment with a promise of state intervention to turn it into a more comprehensive resort, a "Las Vegas East." Earlier the same day, Christie described Atlantic City's "historically corrupt, ineffective, inefficient local government that has squandered hundreds of millions of dollars."

In 2011 Christie signed legislation creating a Tourism District that empowered the largely state-appointed CRDA to take control of Atlantic City's profitable core — the area around the casinos, Boardwalk and The Walk (a shopping district). Under Christie's law, CRDA could determine land-use policy, make "public safety improvements" and use eminent domain (among other municipal responsibilities) within the 1,700-square-acre section of Atlantic City. Although he had at first

expressed tentative support (before the details were clear), Langford denounced Christie's move as "modern day apartheid," a policy sure to heighten the divide between the casinos and the rest of Atlantic City.

"The governor and the Legislature have further divided the city into a 'tale of two cities,' whereas half of the city lies within the geographical boundaries of the Tourism District and the other half does not," Langford wrote in an op-ed that ran in the local newspaper, the *Press of Atlantic City*. "The Tourism District will receive special consideration and additional resources. Conversely, the parts that are outside the district will not. Is this not separate but unequal?" Langford has a history as a pugnacious critic of casino-oriented development that forsakes the rest of the city. A 1996 *New York Times* article quotes him, as vice president of City Council, condemning casino redevelopment as a "Negro remover."

Christie's attempt to blame Atlantic City's decrepit state on the municipal government is a profound misreading of power dynamics in the city, where the casinos and CRDA have long wielded very significant influence and investment power. Nonetheless, on February 28, the governor opened up on Langford again: "Atlantic City is one of the worst-run, the most bankrupt, ridiculous municipal governments in America... I mean that municipal government is one of the most God-awful, wasteful municipal governments in America. They have a mayor who has no idea what he's doing."

Still, exactly two months before Revel opened, and a year after Langford's denunciation of Christie's legislation, CRDA released a 190-page *Tourism District Master Plan*, outlining a vision for Atlantic City's future and summing up its issues in candid terms. Langford voted in favor of it.

Christie's attempt to blame Atlantic City's decrepit state on the municipal government is a profound misreading of power dynamics in the city.

CRDA does have a track record of funding casino-focused redevelopment while ignoring the city itself. (The agency did not respond to multiple interview requests for this article.) The authority's board features very little local government representation: The mayor has a permanent seat but most of the other 17 members are state-appointed, including two casino representatives. To date CRDA has built 1,500 housing units in Atlantic City, but a 1997 investigative report from the *Newark Star-Ledger* found that "The authority has returned to the casinos more than a third of the money it has taken from them, by raiding funds earmarked for community development to subsidize \$175 million in hotel expansion. When that money is spent, the CRDA will have built six times as many casino hotel rooms as houses." Authority funds were also spent to boost the casinos in more indirect ways, including spending tens of millions of dollars bulldozing old buildings, regardless of displacement, and widening and beautifying streets — chiefly leading from the Atlantic City Expressway to the casinos — with shrubs and trees to block visitors' view of the city as they drove to their gaming destinations.

Perhaps that's because 35 years after legalized gambling came to town, everyone from cocktail servers to executives acknowledges that the city needs to attract people for reasons besides casino gambling if it is to survive. Authored by the real estate firm Jones Lang LaSalle, the Master Plan is forthright about the need to invest in infrastructure and amenities outside of the casinos. The plan borrows generously from the playbook of more progressive and affluent cities, with recommendations for bike lanes, farmers markets and non-gambling amenities like an indoor water park and a movie theater. There is talk of converting grim parking areas into glassy mixed-use complexes of shops, eateries and apartments or condos. ("The streets will come alive when interior activity spills out onto the sidewalk amid an inviting new landscape scheme," the Master Plan enthuses about its dream version of Pacific Avenue, the main drag closest to the strip.)

The plan acknowledges that casinos themselves are complicit in the evisceration of any attractions, for residents or tourists, outside their own thick, windowless walls. "The basic casino design with their fortress like

exteriors, massive parking structures and no ground level retail [have] added to the elimination of street life,” the report acknowledges.

Revel was meant to signal the reversal of this trend. Instead of drab buffets, the casino features stylish restaurants. Gamblers can actually see the outside world from windows where the gaming floor faces the ocean. The casino sports luxury spas and features high-profile concerts, including Beyoncé’s first post-pregnancy show. But even with its variations on the traditional AC formula, the project still depended on the diminishing casino-tourism market.

“The thinking about Atlantic City is just as impoverished as the city itself,” says Bryant Simon, professor of history at Temple University and author of *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America*. “Who was at the table? The same people who have been at the table all along, so they suggested what has already been done.”

JUST SIT THERE AND PULL A LEVER

In its heyday Atlantic City was a thriving resort town. As Nelson Johnson chronicles in *Boardwalk Empire: The Birth, High Times, and Corruption of Atlantic City*, the Atlantic City of 1925 sported 21 theaters, four newspapers and 99 trains puffing in and out of the city every day during the summer. As late as 1940 it was home to 64,000 permanent residents, but after World War II Atlantic City began to lose its prestigious aura as car and airplane travel, and higher wages, opened up other resorts with warmer year-round weather. The collapse of beachside Jim Crow contributed, too, as Simon describes in *Boardwalk of Dreams*. Before the 1960s, African Americans were kept away from the Boardwalk (unless they were working) and relegated to their own neighborhoods, seats in the theaters and a sole beach. As this racist regime crumbled, more middle-class white residents left, hastening the onset of the maladies afflicting most post-war American cities: Disinvestment, middle-class (and at first mostly white) flight, falling tax revenues, climbing property taxes, declining job opportunities, rising unemployment and crime.

By the mid-1970s elites promoted legalized gambling within the city as a panacea. In 1976, they succeeded in passing a statewide referendum that allowed



Mayor Langford swearing in some new police recruits in City Hall.

casino gambling only within the confines of Atlantic City. A “CITY REBORN,” the *Press of Atlantic City* crowed the morning after the 1976 gambling referendum passed. The owner of local hotspot Luigi’s Restaurant, Curis Kugel, predicted that “[t]he city will turn around and be what it was in the twenties and thirties.” Gambling in Atlantic City was a massive success — for the industry. From 1978 to 2007 the gaming industry raked in profits, with 30 to 35 million people visiting every year and spending their time almost exclusively within the casinos. **Most customers** came from New Jersey, New York or Eastern Pennsylvania, and until 2007 the city controlled a total monopoly on casino gambling in the region. But monopolistic industries tend to be complacent and, as the money flowed in, the casinos blithely isolated themselves from the rest of Atlantic City. Customers were funneled from the Atlantic City Expressway to the hulking parking edifices which, if they weren’t directly attached to the

casinos, are outfitted with glass-encased bridges allowing gamblers to walk from their cars to the slot machines without setting foot on the sidewalk below.

Outside the insular confines of the casino complexes, Atlantic City rotted. Those who predicted the industry and the city would grow together were bitterly disappointed. Kugel's revenues were cut in half after the first casino opened, and by 1986 his restaurant was a parking lot. Luigi's didn't suffer this fate alone. A 1999 National Gambling Impact Study Commission [report](#) quoted a local witness, who testified, "in 1978 there were

are difficult to find and beach access was made nearly impossible without traversing the casino floor, on which children were expressly forbidden from setting foot. The industry profited from what The Master Plan delicately terms the "lack of non-gaming investment and a widely held perception that the City requires significant improvements in safety, cleanliness and the street-level experience." Why wander into the scary, depressed wasteland, when a customer could just sit there and pull a lever again?

"Donald Trump, Steve Wynn... I don't think



The Revel casino towers over Atlantic City's dilapidated housing stock.

311 taverns and restaurants in Atlantic City. Nineteen years later, only 66 remained, despite the promise that gaming would be good for the city's own." The city's last movie theater closed in 1983. Dead space in the northern neighborhoods grew worse, as a wave of "landlord lightening" rolled over properties in the neighborhoods adjacent to the casinos, which were suddenly worth more as potential parking lots than as rental housing. The decline of small business and the rise of vacant land reduced foot traffic. Crime remained persistent and much of the city housed intense concentrations of poverty.

The early casinos built during the gold rush of the late 1970s and 1980s actively discouraged customers from exploring the Boardwalk, let alone the rest of the city. There are no windows on the ground floor, exits

they conscientiously thought 'let's make sure Atlantic City looks like a dump,' but they quickly realized that Atlantic City's dumpiness wasn't a crucial economic factor for them," Simon says. "That's what people missed from the get-go. As long as there was no competition, having a vibrant casino area in the midst of a sea of squalor wasn't really a problem. It enhanced the value of the casinos because they didn't have competition for people's discretionary income with the rest of the city. They let the fabric of the city decay so extensively that building an urban resort with gambling, rather than a bunch of casinos in the middle of a decaying city, will defy all odds."

The most recent census data available, from 2011, reports that nearly 30 percent of the 40,000 people who



The Trump Palace peeking through a couple of houses to its north.

call Atlantic City home live in poverty. (By comparison, Atlantic County's **overall poverty rate** is 12.5 percent.) Only 70 percent of its high-school students graduate, a rate significantly lower than the state's 86 percent. Atlantic City's unemployment rate is 16.7 percent. The city's social problems are exacerbated as neighboring counties and municipalities export their responsibilities to AC. Neighboring towns largely avoided their commitments under the state's **Mount Laurel Doctrine**, which is meant to spread the responsibility of affordable housing provision equally. According to New Jersey's Fair Share Housing Center, 24 percent of Atlantic City's housing stock is "deed-restricted affordable housing," while neighboring Galloway only provides 3.32 percent of its housing stock and Egg Harbor 1.43 percent. Meanwhile the Atlantic City Rescue Mission is the only easily accessible homeless shelter in all of South Jersey and the rest of the region simply buys one-way bus tickets for homeless people who seek social services. "Greyhound therapy," Demario calls

it. According to Nancy Hickman of the Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Camden (which does not operate the Rescue Mission) a recent survey showed 60 percent of those using the shelter were from outside Atlantic County.

Shannon O'Neill recently left a job at the Atlantic City Public Library (she now lives in New York), where much of her time was spent helping people fill out housing applications and steering residents through the byzantine process of obtaining aid. "If the library was a boat, the reference desk was the crow's nest for seeing everything that goes on in the city," says O'Neill, who grew up a few miles from Atlantic City. "You got a sense of the realities of the drug problem. I'd be sitting at the reference desk and someone would hand me a pile of pills and ask me to identify them. You'd find needles in the trashcan. But I walked a lot and never once felt uncomfortable on the streets. People identified me as the 'librarian lady.' They knew me. I'd helped a lot of them get housing."

Intense concentrations of poverty tend to breed



Boardwalk vendors sell rides on Atlantic City's fabled rolling chairs.

underground economies and violence. Atlantic City is no exception. (O'Neill ate lunch next to a bullet hole in the break room window: "It was just a stray," the cop assigned to the library assured her.) In 1971, with a population of more than 47,000, six people were murdered in Atlantic City. Since the legalization of gambling, the number of homicides has more often been in the double digits than not and in 2012, the murder count came close to the 2006 high of 18. The **violent crime rate is higher** than in other casino cities (although police officials point out that the rate is based on the city's tiny population, not the 29 million annual tourists who arrive every year). And though most of the violence takes place far from the casinos, it still has a chilling effect on tourism.

"I don't see the city as dangerous as other people do because, really, it tends to be criminals shooting criminals," says McDevitt, who currently lives in midtown Atlantic City. "But... if that person with money in their pocket doesn't feel safe, they're not fucking coming. They don't need an adventure. That's why they live in the suburbs. The excitement is in the casino, not in walking from your

car to the casino."

The industry and CRDA do not completely ignore the city's ills. During the days of Atlantic City's monopoly, the casinos supported the Rescue Mission with donations of money (Bally's gave \$800,000 in 1996) and food (Trump Plaza had a longstanding annual donation of \$340,000 worth of leftover buffet food). Others remember when the casinos tore down the city's grand old hotels and donated much of the furniture to charity.

For its part, CRDA built 1,500 units of affordable housing. Many of the new homes are in the city's northern neighborhoods, less than a mile from Revel and the northern tip of the Boardwalk. But the white, vinyl-sided duplexes feel isolated. "A lot of what CRDA has built, they've done a better job at creating immediate shelter than in urban planning and building community," Gordon says. There is one stunningly good soul restaurant on Melrose Avenue, Kelsey and Kim's, and not much more. You can easily stroll south down Baltic Avenue from the edge of the neighborhood to the upscale

boutiques of The Walk without seeing a single pedestrian or active storefront. Walking up Pacific Avenue past Revel into an older, blighted neighborhood to the east of the CRDA developments, a pickup truck pulls up and the driver rolls down his window. “Man, where are you going?” he asks.

The city still contains no movie theaters, few independent shops and the sole supermarket is a Save A Lot, sporting a gruesomely withered array of vegetables. “There’s nothing to do here but drink,” says one off-duty casino worker popping open a beer in her living room after work. But no one can argue the jobs brought by the casinos haven’t helped the region. A 1996 [report](#) by a pair of Rutgers professors shows that in 1990 the industry employed 47,700 people. Even now with the casino market in a tailspin the casino-hotels directly employ around [34,360 people](#), although only 6,939 live in Atlantic City itself (out of an employed civilian workforce of [15,944](#)).

Revel is the only non-union casino in Atlantic City and, as a result, its employees have had to bear more of the burden for their employer’s business failings. “Benefits at Revel are pretty shitty,” says one Revel employee (he asked that his name be withheld for fear of retaliation). “If you are trying to cover kids or family, [health care] gets insanely expensive. In a lot of departments they’ve cut hours... you have people considered full-time employees who are working 20 hours a week. How can you afford to live on that?”

RISING SEAWATERS

After Sandy, the *Press of Atlantic City* was full of [stories](#) about the thousands of families across the region that lost everything in the storm, and a chilling in-depth [report](#) on the dangers that climate change for the Jersey Shore. (The sea level in South Jersey has risen nine inches

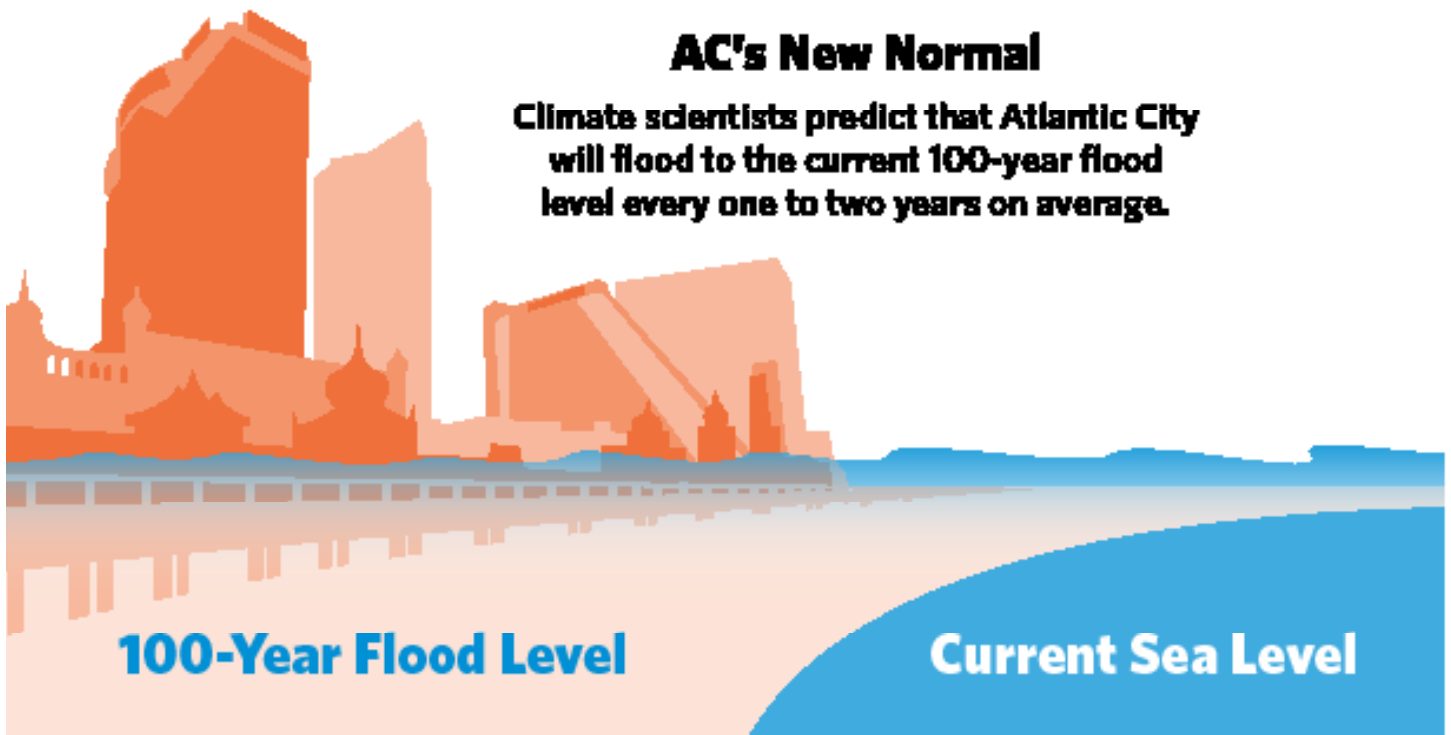
The combination of rising water levels and an increased likelihood of more powerful and frequent storms are a terrifying combination for a region with a lot of housing near the ocean and an economy dependent on tourism.

This does not include those who work in independent restaurants and other businesses within the complexes, like retail outlets in Tropicana, dubbed The Quarter, or all the construction jobs that have been sustained by the industry’s expansion.

Many of the jobs, both within the casino-hotels and the building trades, are unionized and provide families with a stable middle-class income, free health care and retirement security. Despite layoffs, Local 54 still has a massive membership, representing between 13,500 and 14,000 food, beverage and hospitality workers. In 2011, as the industry continued to weaken, Local 54 negotiated its first concessionary contract since legal gaming came to Atlantic City. But the union managed to preserve free health care and their members’ retirement security, while givebacks were limited to lost vacation days and altered work rules — a situation unimaginable in an unorganized industry with rapidly declining profit margins.

since 1959. Princeton climate scientists cited in the article predict a six-inch increase by 2030 and a further eight inches by 2050.) The combination of rising water levels and an increased likelihood of more powerful and frequent storms are a terrifying combination for a region with a lot of housing near the ocean and an economy dependent on tourism.

Such existential threats, however, have yet to make it onto the agenda of the region’s political and business elites. Instead the industry concentrated its energies on countering George Stephanopoulos’ [post-hurricane lament](#) about the supposed ruin of the Boardwalk: “One of the most famous landmarks in the country, so much of it destroyed.” Disappointing gaming and tourism numbers were justifiably blamed on the catastrophic weather: October’s casino winnings [dropped a stunning 19.9 percent](#) compared with the same time period in



Sources: National Conference of State Legislatures and the University of Maryland's Center for Integrative Environmental Research.

2011; in comparison, September only **fell by** 6.3 percent. The casinos' response was typified by a statement from Elizabeth Cartmell, president of the industry-funded Atlantic City Alliance, a non-profit **created** "to broaden the destination's appeal beyond a gaming area."

"We're open for business," Cartmell told NPR in a **December interview**. "We're in great shape physically and, quite honestly, we need your help."

So far there is little sign that anyone is acting on the Master Plan's recommendations to make Atlantic City a little more, well, like a real city. The most visible aspect of the new Atlantic City being championed by the Tourism District, thus far, isn't even in Atlantic City. With a budget of \$20 million, the Atlantic City Alliance launched a massive ad "Do AC" ad campaign in its traditional markets — the Philadelphia, Baltimore and New York metropolitan areas — to attract customers with promises that the city is no longer a one-game town, but a full-blown resort. The **Artlantic Wonder** installation, built on vacant land adjacent to the Boardwalk and opened a little more than a week after Sandy struck, is the first in a series of art projects meant to beautify the area and add to the city's attractions.

"Perhaps symbolically the Tourism District may

have changed some perceptions, but substantively nothing has really changed," Langford says. "By any measure that you would use to gauge or calculate whether or not the Tourism District has dramatically changed Atlantic City, I think you would conclude that it hasn't. Casinos are still mired in the same downward economic spiral, crime has not decreased. It's the same as it was before."

There isn't much sign of the inflated law enforcement presence that many assumed would be part of the Tourism District. There was talk of employing state troopers to patrol the district, but the city blanched at the idea of paying for a public safety resource they would have little control over. Instead a state police lieutenant colonel runs law enforcement in the district, but no state troopers have been introduced. (The ranks of Boardwalk Ambassadors, approachable official representatives with no police powers, expanded from 22 to 60.)

There isn't a single police officer or neon-clad Boardwalk Ambassador in evidence during a midday stroll along the Boardwalk on President's Day weekend. Between the ailing Atlantic Club and Boardwalk Hall abandoned buildings dot Pacific Avenue. The bartender at the local Ducktown Tavern, asked for her opinion on the Tourism District, says she's never heard of it.

“If the concept of the Tourism District was to do things by half measures, it would be a success,” McDevitt says over pizza at Tony’s Baltimore Grill (the waitresses are all members of the union and many have known him since he was a kid). “I thought, when they first talked about it, that it would be a sweeping thing, but they’ve just changed a few people at the tops of the organizations and they’ve done some incremental things. The real bulk

“WHY IN THE WORLD HAVEN’T YOU GONE INTO THE NEIGHBORHOODS?”

Nelson Rodriguez, for one, is not sanguine about the city’s fate. The former casino worker and union organizer with UNITE HERE came to Atlantic City in 1993 from New



The Casino Redevelopment Authority has built some affordable housing using revenue from the casinos.

of the work has not even begun. But the governor, as big a bully as he seems to be, chickened out.”

This is partially because CRDA’s power over the Tourism District has been scaled back since the legislation was initially proposed. While CRDA controls planning and zoning, it doesn’t have authority over code enforcement, so they cannot force a property owner to renovate an unlawfully dilapidated building on his land.

The biggest problem for the Boardwalk, however, is the chronic neglect of the neighborhoods that surround it. There is nothing keeping people in Atlantic City and desolation isn’t exactly working as a tourist attraction.

York, after emigrating from the Dominican Republic. “I had a hard time finding a job in New York... and my wife liked Atlantic City,” he says. He was sold when he found out a casino job would offer health care and a pension. “And I can go to the beach,” he adds.

“The future to me doesn’t look good,” Rodriguez says. “We have a big problem, because of the competition. I don’t see nothing really good to try to alleviate this situation.” When asked about the Tourism District, he just laughs. “To me, it’s like when you have nice, clean clothes, but the body is dead. Nice shirt, nice sweater,

very clean, but your body is dead.”

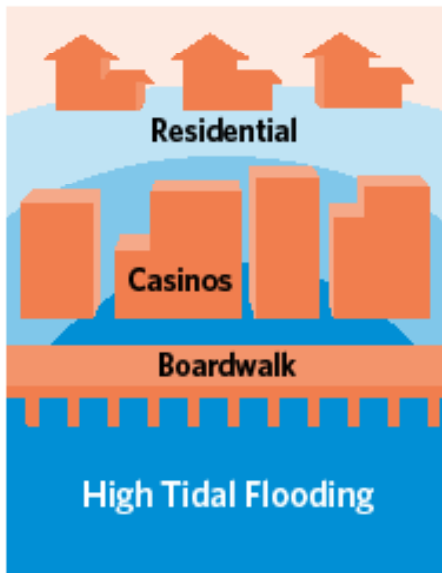
CRDA is planning a new redevelopment project to rise right in Revel’s backyard. The new development would require leveling about 60 existing affordable housing units and replacing them with higher-end mixed-use developments and a park. It’s not hard to deduce motivation — the casino’s current view of public housing probably isn’t helping burnish the upscale image

to do a lot of major infrastructure improvements,” says McDevitt, who raised his kids in the South Inlet neighborhood. “Spending \$50 million to move poor people isn’t going to put a dent in any of that. It’s just going to put a couple vacant lots around Revel.”

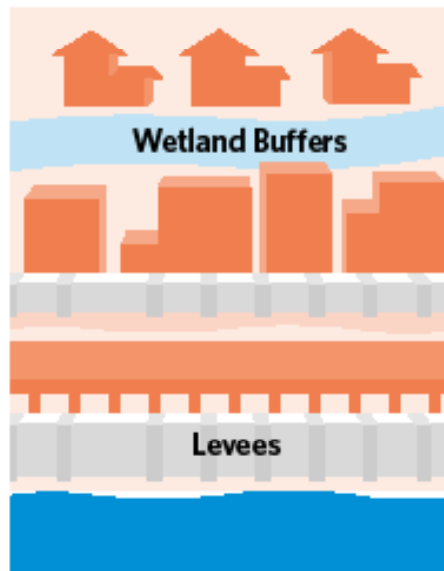
The need to revitalize the South Inlet, and Atlantic City’s other depressed neighborhoods, might present less of a crisis if CRDA hadn’t so thoroughly neglected that

Under the Boardwalk... the Water Is Rising

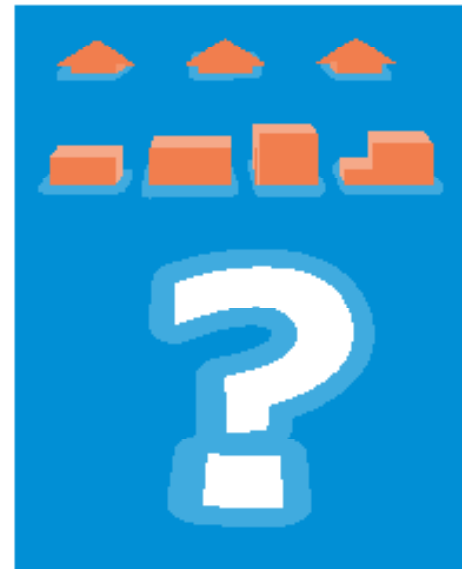
Rising Sea Level



Adaptation



What’s Next ?



Sources: National Conference of State Legislatures and the University of Maryland’s Center for Integrative Environmental Research.

its developers are going for.

Originally the New Jersey Economic Development Authority was meant to borrow \$50 million from an unspecified lender, which CRDA would have paid back with funding from Revel’s bonanza profits. Now with the casino in dire straits, the loan is on hold and the project is **slated to proceed in phases**, although it is unclear how many or when they will be enacted. Affordable housing residents, who were **told** they would have to move by last December, are in limbo. The whole scheme strikes McDevitt as absurd, especially given the state of Atlantic City’s roads and the sheer quantity of vacant land and blighted buildings that need to be dealt with. “We have

duty before the casino industry took an interest in its surroundings. Back in 1997 a Star-Ledger investigative team interviewed David Sciarra, who used to work for a CRDA-watchdog agency that was abolished by former Republican governor Christie Whitman. Looking at the Atlantic City that CRDA wrought, his question for the authority was, “Why in the world haven’t you gone into the neighborhoods?”

It’s still a good question. Atlantic City needs vibrant neighborhoods, anchored by small businesses and street life, to provide a substantial tax base and the kind of safety that a good police department can supplement, but cannot create single-handedly. In recent years CRDA has

explored plans for mixed-use, high density development around regional train stations, an expanded rail line and, especially promisingly, attempted to attract Richard Stockton College to invest in student housing in the city (it currently only has non-residential operations). There

Rodriguez owns a CRDA-built house and is actively involved in the community. But he doesn't feel confident in his city's future: "I have a lot of friends who are moving. Working families, where the father's not working, the mother's not working." He isn't specific about which

When asked about the Tourism District, he just laughs. "To me, it's like when you have nice, clean clothes, but the body is dead. Nice shirt, nice sweater, very clean, but your body is dead."

is talk of opening a massive indoor marketplace, akin to Philadelphia's Reading Terminal Market. It is notable, however, that Revel is standing while none of these projects have yet gone anywhere.

Over lunch at a Dominican eatery on Arctic Avenue, Rodriguez explains his 20-year history in Atlantic City. "Atlantic City is a very nice place to come and play and have a family," says Rodriguez, who seems to know everyone and is greeted by almost every customer who walks in the restaurant's door. "I don't go on vacation too much because everything is pretty good here. I live two blocks from the beach. We have very good restaurants. When I am in New York and I find a job, I have to take a 45-minute train ride from Brooklyn to Manhattan. Here it took me 10 minutes. I could walk to work every day."

political figures he disdains — city, state or CRDA — but any mention of politicians brings a derisive snort. "They have to review what they've been doing for the last 30 years and create something new and see where we made mistakes, where we did wrong, how we can bring people back. I don't see nobody doing that."

Rodriguez is considering moving to the Philadelphia suburb of Cherry Hill. He's angry that Revel got tax credits while his property taxes increased and is worried about the struggling industry, but the chief reason he cites for a move is beyond the control of McDevitt, CRDA, Christie or Langford. Driving past UNITE HERE's waterlogged union hall, Rodriguez says that after Hurricanes Irene and Sandy he'd like to live somewhere where he doesn't have to evacuate every year.



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