

## **The Ideal Meeting and Convention Destination**

Atlantic City Convention Center

by Jen Hocken



Built in 1997, the Atlantic City Convention Center (ACCC) in New Jersey is one of the largest convention centers on the East Coast. It features 486,000 square feet of exhibit halls, 45 meeting rooms with over 100,000 square feet of space, more than 1,200 parking spaces, and is connected to the Sheraton Hotel. The New Jersey Transit train station is also connected to the center, which is highly convenient for passage between Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Atlantic City, New Jersey.

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The ACCC is owned by the New Jersey Casino Reinvestment Development Authority (CRDA) and is managed by the private management company, Spectra Venue Management. Spectra has significant experience in the operation of successful convention centers, arenas, and stadiums in the U.S. For sales and marketing of the ACCC, the CRDA and Spectra partner with Meet AC and together all three are the driving force behind the full-service convention center.

A wide variety of meetings, conventions, and events are held at the ACCC including educational gatherings, corporate meetings, tradeshows, and sporting events. Multicultural celebrations are also fast emerging as a new market for the convention center. Aside from the many meeting spaces at the ACCC, there are numerous offsite meeting places to take advantage of in Atlantic City as well. As a resort destination surrounded by beaches, the city offers unique venues that overlook the ocean and the boardwalk, and meetings can even be held by boat. The various hotels and casinos in the area boast meeting rooms with pleasing views, particularly the Ocean Casino Resort and the Claridge Hotel.

Along with the city of Atlantic City, the convention center has seen growth each year from diverse market sectors. It was not long ago that Atlantic City was considered to be strictly a casino and gaming destination and this was its only audience for tourism until roughly 2014 when the attitude began to shift. The casino property owners are all now looking to include the growing exhibition, convention, and meetings industry and as Atlantic City grows its mix of businesses, the ACCC continues to get even busier.

Other casinos and resorts that have expanded their conference center in the city include Harrah's Resort, which opened a waterfront conference center featuring 50,000 square feet of ballrooms; Resorts Atlantic City, which opened a 12,000 square foot conference center; and the Claridge Hotel, which added 15,000 square feet of space to its property. "What we've seen is significant investment from the casino properties in the meetings market," says Jim Wood, President and CEO of Meet AC. "They're all interested in growing the meetings and convention market for their properties, and that's great news for the market and excellent news for Atlantic City as a whole."

Recently, the Ocean Casino Resort and the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Atlantic City underwent major renovations and on June 27, 2018, they both reopened for business on the exact same day. Ocean Casino Resort, previously named Revel Casino Hotel Atlantic City, had closed in 2014 and reopened under new ownership and new management four years later. The new owners made an investment to renovate the building; however, the property was still quite new and its main structure did not require work. In 2018, Ocean Casino Resort re-opened with a new casino floor and brought its variety of restaurants back online, while the Hard Rock refurbished the former Taj Mahal Casino.

The multitude of attractions in Atlantic City is certainly an added bonus for visitors when attending conventions. Created over a century ago, the historic Steel Pier is a 1,000-foot long amusement park on the boardwalk. The new 227 foot high Observation Wheel at the Steel Pier is a particularly favorite attraction that towers over the city's boardwalk and it is an excellent amenity for both convention delegates and leisure customers. "The observation wheel is becoming popular in several cities and we now have one right on the Steel Pier with great vistas. It really is a cool experience there; you can have a meal, you can have cocktails, or you can just ride on the wheel. It is a really nice upscale experience for the travellers," describes Wood.

The ACCC was recently awarded the designation of LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Gold for its commitment to continuously improving its green building and sustainability efforts. The owners of the convention center took note of the fact that it has become increasingly important to the many organizations associated with the ACCC, and they made a concerted effort to make all improvements possible.

The LEED Gold certification tells potential new businesses that the ACCC is environmentally aware and strives to reduce waste as a large convention center. "Achieving LEED certification is a market differentiator that will position the Atlantic City Convention Center in a leading group of venues across the country that value sustainability and its positive impact on the visitor experience, environment, and financial returns. The certification will be an important talking point when vying for new business at the convention center," said Wood in a press release.

As discussed in a previous feature of Business in Focus, the ACCC started a \$9 million restroom renovation in the fall of 2018 which is the largest, most significant public improvement to the facility since the venue opened. The project is scheduled to be completed by the summer of 2019 – ahead of the planned schedule – and it consists of upgrading more than 20,000 square feet of total space throughout the building. The installation of new lighting, wall tile, flooring, toilets, and mirrors is almost complete and so far it has been very well received by clients and attendees at the convention center.

The extensive bathroom renovation goes hand in hand with the ACCC's LEED Gold certification process. The Meet AC website states that the new design will feature low flow flush valves for toilets that will reduce water usage to 1.28 gallons per flush (GPF) from the original 1.6 GPF, which will save approximately 100,000 gallons of water per year. Each restroom now also has auto-flush toilets, automatic appliances and individual climate controls to improve efficiency.

The ACCC continues to make smart investments in areas that benefit the comfort of its guests and increase its offering of amenities. Another upgrade is the convention center's purchase of Sport Court flooring, an investment of nearly \$1 million. Sport Court is a type of connected indoor flooring on which different sporting events, such as basketball and volleyball games, can be played, and its incorporation at the ACCC is accommodating the growth of the venue's sports clientele. In one recent weekend alone, the convention center had 28 basketball courts assembled that were flipped and used for volleyball the following week.

In addition, the ACCC is known for its exceptional catering services and for its Executive Chef George Fisher with over 35 years of culinary experience. George Fisher was named the "Chef of the Year" in 2019 by the Professional Chef's Association of South Jersey and he has been recognized a number of times for his charitable contributions in the local community. Meet AC, the CRDA, and Spectra collaborate with local organizations to create positive working relationships and attract a more diverse range of events.

When asked about the future of the ACCC, Jason Resetar of Spectra, Assistant General Manager and Director of Facilities of the ACCC, anticipates "collaborating with CRDA, Meet AC, and the Atlantic City Sports Commission to attract more diverse events including e-gaming and sporting events to take place at the ACCC to keep costs low for event organizers."

The continued strong interest in Atlantic City as a meeting and convention destination since 2014 has helped to grow and diversify the ACCC as well as the city's entire economy. Through aggressive marketing and sales efforts, the convention center has seen interest from its clients double, and it has no plans of slowing down.

"We've got business booked seven years out now, which is exciting for us, and we continue to see excellent growth in all four seasons of the year in AC so our outlook is very positive," says Wood. "We think the meetings segment is a very bright light for Atlantic City; it is growing and we're excited about the future impact it will have on the city's hospitality and tourism industry."