

## Atlantic City Lights Up For Weed Holiday

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ATLANTIC CITY, NJ — Pungent clouds of resinous smoke wafted on the breeze Thursday afternoon as New York Avenue became weed central.

The third Atlantic City 420 Festival returned to a parking area on that block, while across the street, a line awaited access to the city's first adult-use cannabis business, recently licensed by New Jersey's Cannabis Regulatory Commission.

The days of cannabis paranoia appeared over, with pipes, joints and bongos getting sparked in easy view of the Atlantic City police officers keeping an eye on the fest.

Organizer Stephen Weiss said before the event that hundreds of advanced tickets had been sold, and he expected more walkup visitors with sunshine in the forecast. Weiss expects the fest to continue to grow, envisioning a crowd of 10,000 by next April or by 4/20/25.

While this one is listed as the third annual festival, Weiss said he had organized other events before New Jersey's 2020 referendum, in which voters said yes to legal marijuana.

Since then, he's brought the event to the Orange Loop, a three-block area of restaurants, bars, music and attractions named for the orange streets on a traditional Monopoly board.

Weiss' NorStep Productions has been booking acts in the area for a little over a decade.

In the afternoon, booths selling T-shirts, handmade items, fashion and art lined the festival area. But the most popular spots were weed focused.

Officially, the only place to get cannabis in Atlantic City without a medical card was at MPX NJ, but there were plenty of buds available inside the festival, with VIP ticket holders given a gram, a pipe and a lighter. Several of the booths asked for donations for containers of marijuana, or the purchase of an unrelated item like a sticker to receive a gift of weed.

State law prohibits those kinds of work-arounds. It is legal to give up to an ounce of marijuana as a gift in New Jersey, if the receiver is 21 or older, but in 2021, the state attorney general warned against giving weed if it is connected to the purchase of another item.

The crowds grew, and the smoke clouds thickened, throughout the day.

Participants expected the biggest crowds later in the day and into the evening, as live music started. There were also plans for a joint rolling contest, as well as raffles and other events.

Nelson Cuesta, of Reading, Pennsylvania, sporting a jacket emblazoned with bright green marijuana leaves, planned to enjoy the festival well into the night, and likely continue on for the after party or other Atlantic City nightlife.

Atlantic City-based comedian Michelle Tomko served as the announcer at the event. She said the festival participants included all walks of life, and that people appeared to be very excited to be back for another year.

Some were in Atlantic City from out of state, enjoying the fest, she said.

Ages ranged from 20-somethings to grandparents.

Ashley Ben, of Newark, Delaware, who had a booth at the festival, said she was surprised by the variety of people at the event, assuming most were probably cannabis indulgers.

“With some people, there’s just kind of a certain look,” she said. But along with the red, gold and green sweat suits, pro-weed T-shirts and brightly colored hair were several people who dressed downright conservatively. “I’m like, I’m surprised you’re here.”

Several of those attending said people have gotten used to cannabis being legal, and that most accepted it as no big deal.

According to the advocacy group NORML, there were more than 30,000 people arrested on marijuana possession charges in 2018. By 2021, that number dropped to 200.

Brandon Astin had T-shirts and other merchandise for sale featuring images of Atlantic City. He said he and his wife founded Homegrown AC. Things were a little slow early in the day, he said, at a booth with no specific weed connections.

“It’s still early,” Astin said. “So far, everybody’s been nice.”

Atlantic City officials are bullish on weed, with a vision of making the city a cannabis center for the East Coast. Weed retail, manufacturing and consumption lounges are approved uses in the city’s Green Zone, which includes much of the city’s extensive commercial area, aside from the Boardwalk.

At MPX NJ, work is already underway on a new location behind the current spot on New York Avenue, with plans to triple the space in a new dispensary for the recreational market.

Long lines remained in place through the day, the first day of recreational sales at the site.

“It’s been steady all day,” said Steven Parrish, a security guard keeping an eye on the line at MPX. He said the business opened in the morning for medical marijuana patients only for the first couple of hours. Sales to adults without medical cards began at 11 a.m. The line remained all day, Parrish said, with no problems.

Johnathan Caldwell, chatting with Parrish at the back of the line in the early afternoon, said he had not been waiting long.

About 15 minutes. Not bad,” he said. A New Jersey resident, he had visited a legal dispensary on a visit to Las Vegas, going to Planet 13, billed as the largest dispensary in the world.

He was not sure what he would get at MPX.

“I’ll maybe get some flower. Maybe some edibles,” he said.

MPX may be the first to offer adult use sales in Atlantic City, but it does not appear likely to be the last, with multiple other businesses seeking state licenses to operate in Atlantic City.