

Written by Administrator
Friday, 30 December 2011 18:00 -

BECAUSE OF space limitations in today's paper, some items were left out of my 2011 casinos year-in-review column. Here is the piece in its entirety:

Another year is ending with the region's two gaming jurisdictions still headed in opposite directions.

As Pennsylvania's casino industry continued its "rush" (as they say about hot players at the poker tables), Atlantic City's financial slide hit five years, with at least one survey suggesting revenue will continue to shrink through 2015. But say what you will about the East's original legal gambling kingdom, things are seldom dull in the beleaguered seaside entertainment capital. Even as its financial woes continued, the town's gambling industry was generating big news on a myriad of fronts.

Interestingly, AyCee's two biggest stories of 2011 were both forward-looking and optimistic in nature.

Key parts of New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie's master plan to revive the city were put into motion this year. What may prove to be most crucial was the transferring of \$30 million in what were annual horse racing subsidies to a new marketing entity called the Atlantic City Alliance. The Alliance will operate under the guidance of **Liza Cartmell**, a former Aramark marketing honcho who recently became the organization's CEO. The town's promotional efforts have long been criminally underfunded; the money (or, more specifically, how it's spent) could be a game-changer.

And speaking of game-changers, there's no denying the importance of the resurrection of the Revel project on the eastern end of the Boardwalk. Thanks to an infusion of \$1 billion and a highly favorable—if controversial—tax-break plan provided by the state, what looked all but dead this time last year is slated to open no later than mid-May of 2012 (and possibly as early as March). While the expected-to-be-stunning Revel is certain to hurt its Atlantic City competitors to some degree, the hope among industry officials is the mega-resort will grow the market by enticing people who heretofore have avoided the city for one reason or another.

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For gaming halls west of the Delaware River, it was another year of impressive growth. Last month, the revenue at Pennsylvania's 11 properties surpassed that of Atlantic City's 11 casinos for the first time (\$245.8 million to \$248.1 million).

Here's a look at other aspects of the year in local gaming:

Casino of the Year

There's still a long way to go for Resorts Casino Hotel, and there were certainly miscues along the way (including laying off cocktail waitresses because they didn't look good in newly designed skimpy costumes). But co-owner-CEO **Dennis Gomes** and his small band of sleep-deprived execs achieved the most important victory of all: Making the oldest legal gambling den outside Nevada relevant again through a seemingly non-stop barrage of marketing and entertainment initiatives. From re-branding the venerable property with a "Boardwalk Empire"-inspired motif to introducing the first gay nightclub located in a casino to bringing in a for-adults-only "Cirque"-type show and the city's first resident drag revue since the 1990s, Gomes and Company made their 34-year-old pleasure dome a Petri dish of outside-the-box thinking.

Casino of the Year (runner-up)

Sands Casino Resort in Bethlehem dashed out to a commanding lead in the race to create the Keystone State's first Las Vegas-style gambling destination. In May, the complex situated on the grounds of the old Bethlehem Steel works opened a 300-room, on-site hotel. The next month, it welcomed Emeril's Italian Table, the property's third eatery run by culinary megastar, Emeril Lagasse. In November, it debuted its bi-level, 31-store shopping mall. In addition, Sands' officials announced the May, 2012 opening of an event center that will seat up to 3,000 for concerts—the booking of which will be handled by music industry behemoth Live Nation. This means the venue will host the kind of A-list musical and comedy acts Live Nation regularly brings to Atlantic City's Borgata Hotel, Casino & Spa.

Saving ACH

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A year ago, the best bet in AyCee was that ACH (formerly the Atlantic City Hilton) wouldn't be around to welcome 2012. The property was over \$350 million in arrears on its loan, and despite a 2010 re-do of its dining level, was in deteriorating physical shape. But a November deal not only erased the staggering mortgage, but included an almost-\$25 million cash infusion for capital improvements.

A new 'Golden' Age

One brand that didn't make it to 2012 was Trump Marina, which, in late May, became the Golden Nugget Atlantic City. Because its new owner, Landry's Inc., the Houston-based hospitality chain, paid a paltry \$31 million for the bayside property, it has been able to pump more than \$100 million into a massive renovation project that when completed (by February if all goes according to plan), should put the casino-hotel in the top tier of local operations in terms of luxury and amenities.

Nice work if you can get it

In April, a Bucks County-based professional gambler named **Don Johnson** spent the weekend playing blackjack at Tropicana Atlantic City. Wagering \$100,000 a hand, he walked out with \$5.8 million in winnings (in the previous four months, he'd won an additional \$10 million at the Trop, Caesars Atlantic City and Borgata). But Johnson wasn't finished. He returned to Tropicana in November and won another \$2 mil.

Let's Eat

Atlantic City's financial woes didn't hamper a dining boom that saw a slew of new casino eateries appear this year. Among the standouts are Scarduzio's Steak, Sushi & Lounge at Showboat Atlantic City and Atlantic Grill at Caesars Atlantic City. But the impossible chore of picking the Best New Restaurant of the Year definitely comes down to a pair of high-end dining salons that easily rank among the city's best:

In a burg where every casino has a top-shelf steakhouse, Vic & Anthony's at Golden Nugget

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claims preeminence with steaks that really do melt in your mouth. And the maple glazed quail appetizer just might be the best opening dish ever conjured in a casino kitchen.

As for Luke Palladino inside Harrah's Resort Atlantic City, suffice it say it reaffirms what the *eat arazzi* have known for years—that the chef whose name the Italian dining room bears isn't just a great cook, but an artist of prodigious talents whose ability to conjure new and different flavors is near-otherworldly.

A 'winning' gig

It wasn't a particularly strong year in casino entertainment; memorable bookings were few compared to years past (notable shows included **Paul Simon** at Borgata in May and at Trump Taj Mahal in November,

Gaga

Lady at

Boardwalk Hall in February and the

Jay-Z

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Kanye West

hip-hop-athon at Boardwalk Hall last month). But in terms of hype, nothing came close to

Charlie Sheen's

mid-April stop at the Taj. At the time, the Hollywood bad boy was enthroned at the very top of the celebrity heap. He didn't have much to say during his time onstage (the program was saved by the first of comic

Jeffery Ross

' "roasts" of Sheen), but it was absolutely a freak show of epic proportions.

Casino Show of the Year

It was even more dismal on the production-show front as skittish casinos mostly played it safe with encore visits from the likes of actor **Chaz Palminteri** and his one-man tour de force, "A Bronx Tale" at Caesars Atlantic City, the a capella warblers

Straight No Chaser

at Harrah's and several editions of the "Legends in Concert" mimic-fest at Harrah's and Bally's Atlantic City. All of which made "The Accused—Nightlife on Trial" a veritable revelation.

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Staged early on Saturday nights on the dance floor of the Providence disco at The Quarter inside Tropicana, "The Accused" was an ingenious, funny and entertaining blend of casino variety show, "Cirque"-style extravaganza and "New Burlesque" presentation that proved to be one of the most creative productions AyCee has seen in years. Alas, despite critical raves, "The Accused" never caught on with the public and, sadly, was cancelled about a month ago.

Proving that even winners can be losers in that wacky town.

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