



# Atlantic City's Evolution



*Tanger Outlets The Walk will span three Atlantic City blocks (left); the Atlantic City Convention Center (above) features more than 600,000 total square feet of space*

**An Interview with Jim Wood,  
President and Chief Executive Officer, Meet AC**

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Jim Wood brings a wealth of experience to Atlantic City's new, more efficient convention and group sales structure. He previously served as President and CEO of the Louisville (Kentucky) Convention & Visitors Bureau and the Providence Warwick (Rhode Island) Convention & Visitors Bureau. Wood is a determined strategist and aims to take meetings and conventions in Atlantic City to the next level.*



*Jim Wood*

**COMPANY BRIEF** *Meet AC is a private, nonprofit sales agency started in June 2014 and funded by the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority (CRDA) luxury tax. Meet AC's raison d'être is to drive meeting and convention business to Atlantic City's Boardwalk Hall, Convention Center, and surrounding hotels. In addition to a sales team focused on market segments of the meetings and convention markets, Meet AC will function as a full-service destination marketing organization (DMO).*

**What was the vision behind the creation of Meet AC and how do you define it?**

Meet AC was created by a group of board members along with the CRDA to provide a singular approach in pursuing meetings and convention business for Atlantic City. They got together and determined that the business model that they were operating under, which was a government structure, was somewhat prohibitive when it came to speed-to-market. Forming a 501(c)(6) not-for-profit organization was seen as a more effective structure for moving more freely with less government involvement as we pursue meetings and convention business.

**How hard is it to get the message out about all that Atlantic City has to offer?**

We have to find our unique niche, message, and brand. To be successful in standing out among the noise of the many other destinations that are going after this business, we have to be aggressive with our messaging and leave no stone unturned in pursuit of our mission to bring business to Atlantic City.

**How is Atlantic City positioned as a destination today and what are its most positive attributes that are often overlooked?**

Atlantic City's hotel occupancies are doing tremendously well. In January, we had hotels running between 80 and 90 percent occupancy, and that is unheard of in a winter destination. There is continued redevelopment of several of the hotels that had been closed; they're being repurposed. Showboat has been converted to a Stockton College campus. Revel is in the process of being sold, and The Atlantic Club is in the process of being sold and being converted into a mixed-use development project.

Sadly, there is not a lot of publicity about those projects.

Bass Pro Shops is also under construction and will open in May of 2015 as part of the 120-store Tanger outlet mall in the heart of downtown. Our convention business continues to grow year over year. Non-gaming revenue is also increasing in Atlantic City.

There are a lot of great things happening here. It's still one of the most vibrant destinations, especially from Memorial Day to Labor Day, when people flock in from all areas. Atlantic City has great years ahead.

**Is the convention focus where you want it to be?**

The Atlantic City Convention Center is clearly relevant today. It has not produced the results that everyone expected, but this is because the destination is such a high-leisure casino customer destination.

We're trying to better position the convention center business. We're trying to find that midweek customer that likes to arrive on a Sunday and depart on a Thursday or Friday. We have altered our philosophy about how we sell the building with the goal of increasing the number of events held in the convention center, which will raise non-gaming revenues as well as gaming revenues in our casino hotels.

**Is Atlantic City still the leader in terms of gaming product?**

Atlantic City is still the leader on the Eastern seaboard. We are a resort destination, and that is something we will never lose. People still want to come to the Jersey Shore and be part of the environment and the fun with casinos lined up along the boardwalk in the Marina District. They offer panoramic views and a great setting. They offer panoramic views and a great setting. Many of the casinos in the Northeast don't have attached hotels and appeal only to the

day gambler who is going to show up for a few hours and then leave. People come here for more than the gaming experience: they come for the entertainment value that Atlantic City provides; for the dining options; and for the beach. We have assets that other stand-alone casinos do not.

**Do you ever reach the point where you're satisfied or are you always looking to improve?**

We're always looking at ways to increase revenue, occupancy, and visitation. We will never rest and feel that we've arrived, and are happy with the number of visitors coming into the city. We'll look at those numbers and determine how to do better.

As the destination continues to grow and strengthen, there will be new product that will want to come in, as well as new inventory, so it will continue to expand or grow its footprint, which will allow us to bring even more customers to the city.

**In leading this effort, how important has it been for you to have the engagement from leaders across different sectors within Atlantic City with Meet AC's work?**

We could not be successful if it wasn't for the full support and engagement of all of our partners working together collaboratively. Any DMO operates as an intermediary between the customer and the product they represent. It's up to the casinos, the hotels, convention centers, and attractions to pull together and promote that they want the business in order to be successful in meeting the needs of the customers.

It does take a village to book a piece of business and it takes everyone's full cooperation to be successful, which means Meet AC will become successful.

**How do you respond to those who might think that Atlantic City's best days are behind it?**

Atlantic City is going through a transition period. At one point in time, we had a dozen casinos and now we have eight, but that correction is good for the destination. We're seeing great visitation in the remaining casinos. Other hotels are being repurposed into non-gaming products, and that means Atlantic City is reevaluating, reinventing, and reinvesting in itself once again. We'll always have gaming as a strong asset, but we hope the non-gaming portion of it will continue to expand and attract a broader audience in the future. ●