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Courtesy of Town of Islip



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TOURISM TAKES OFF

Hospitality industry revs up as Omicron recedes and warm weather nears



Courtesy of Town of Islip



Photo by Judy Walker

Long Island MacArthur Airport Commissioner Shelley LaRose-Arken and Town of Islip Supervisor Angie Carpenter.

By ADINA GENN

With the COVID-19 positivity rates down, prompting the lifting of the mask mandates, Long Islanders are breathing a sigh of relief. Now, they are eager to see friends, meet for a drink, hit up a museum or shop, see a show and grab dinner.

"People are ready to go out – we've seen a difference in the last couple of weeks," said Mark Lessing, executive vice president at Lessing's Inc., who oversees the company's restaurant division. "We're starting to feel that energy again. You can tell a difference."

That energy is good news for the hospitality and tourism industry.

Sure a new COVID variant may be hovering, but right now, with spring so near, there is optimism seemingly everywhere.

Industry projections show that "leisure could be back to record number in 2022," Kristen Jarnagin Reynolds, president and

CEO of Discover Long Island, said. The missing link now is business travel, which might not return till 2023, and international travel perhaps not returning till 2024.

International travel "is starting to open up, but there is a lot of hesitation because of restrictions and requirements," she said. Travelers are concerned about "getting someplace and not being able to get back."

On Long Island, businesses are already feeling the benefits of the recent lifting of the mask mandate, she said.

"It's a very positive impact," she said. As the COVID positivity "numbers go down nationwide, consumer confidence and travel tick up dramatically."

At Long Island MacArthur Airport, the Town of Islip drove steady improvements to serve the community through 2021, and expects continued growth this year and beyond. New routes, a new air carrier, infrastructure upgrades and new amenities are all part of the equation.

"We stayed steady with our long-term goals, adapted to the year's challenging realities, and did not lose sight of the role our airport plays in providing much-needed economic recovery for our region," Town Supervisor Angie Carpenter said in a statement.

MacArthur "recovered the highest percentage of its 2019 daily departures" among six New York City metro airports and among 15 small, medium, and large hub airports in New York and New England, according to the town, citing data from the Department of Transportation and OAG, which tracks air travel. And the trend is expected to continue, according to the town, in reference to data from OAG.

Last June, the airport offered a new nonstop route to Nashville via Southwest Airlines.

And this week, MacArthur is preparing for Breeze Airways' launch of its first flight from the airport to Charleston, South Carolina. Breeze's Chairman and CEO David Neele-

man, the founder of Jet Blue, is in town to mark the event. The airline will also fly from MacArthur to Norfolk, Virginia.

And beginning in May, New Orleans via what the airline calls a "BreezeThru" direct flight through Charleston, with no change of planes, will be available. Breeze will also offer a flight exclusively for the Kentucky Derby leaving Islip in May.

And while many in the community are eager to travel to new destinations, Carpenter said the region is "looking forward to welcoming visitors to Long Island, and bringing more new jobs and economic growth to our region."

Those traveling to and from MacArthur will find a new entrance sign, unveiled in November, welcoming visitors. Inside is the newly-opened Blue/Point Brewpub, featuring limited-release beers, snacks and burgers.

There, visitors can expect a dose of regional hospitality, which abounds across the island, while venues look to keep people healthy and safe.



Photo by Judy Walker

RONNIE DRAGOON: 'People have more hope. I think there's a light in the proverbial tunnel.'

At any of the six Ben's Kosher Delis, for example, tables are further apart than pre-pandemic to allow for "more space between patrons" so that they feel comfortable about dining indoors, said owner Ronnie Dragoon.

Over the last few weeks, he's seen in uptick in indoor dining, something that's dipped in the pandemic. The takeout side of his business has been "robust," and given the nature of the kosher deli business, "it was easy to pivot to curbside" pickup, he said.

But when he sees an increase in indoor dining on Sundays, the traditional day for family gatherings, it's a good sign that people are happy to venture out.

"People have more hope," he said. "I think there's a light in the proverbial tunnel."

At this moment, Dragoon is having staff wear masks until he has a clearer picture of "how it all plays out. I'd rather side with caution," he said.

And he's keeping the paper menus and sanitizing stations "in every store, so people feel comfortable going in and out."

Lessing said that his team has "learned so much over the last couple of years." With all the HVAC, filtration and protocol upgrades, "we are so much safer than we were."

Lessing expected many of the new systems will stay in place, "because they are actually



Photo by Judy Walker

KRISTEN JARNIGAN REYNOLDS: 'We all collectively did the work to stay safe and get through [Omicron]. Now we have to get out there as a community and support our businesses.'



Courtesy of Lessing's Inc.

MARK LESSING: 'People are ready to go out – we've seen a difference in the last couple of weeks.'

good for us."

Now, he said, "our game plan is we're trying to get back to normal as can possibly be." People will find physical menus again rather than bar codes – though that's still an option for those who would prefer to see menus on their phones.

And the menu offerings, which "were a lot smaller and kept tighter" amid the height of the pandemic, now have more options. "We added back a lot of entrees," Lessing said.

For those dining at View, a Lessing's location in Oakdale, people can eat outdoors where there is a new "retractable awning, with heat and fans – it's not quite year round," Lessing said, pointing out that it opens up dining options and "the view there is unbelievable."

And for those seeking a night of cocktails and dancing, along with food, Lessing's in the last year opened Goldy's Gem, formerly the Southside Hotel in Bay Shore.

This weekend may have proved a turning point. "The Super Bowl was great," Lessing said. "We did a lot of business inside the restaurant and a lot of takeout." And bookings for Valentine's Day were "even better than before COVID," he said.

Of course Long Island is more than just restaurants. Reynolds pointed to the region's beaches, parks, museums, shops and theaters – destinations that are popular with locals and tourists alike. It's brought about such demand that "there are eight hotels in the pipeline for Long Island," something the region hasn't seen in decades, she said. "It will be terrific to have all this new inventory."

Among the hotels is one slated for the Nautical Mile. And this year the Northport Hotel is expected to open across the street from the John W. Engeman Theater, near shopping and the harbor.

A lot of venues have taken the time when business slowed to refresh their facilities. This includes Landmark on Main Street in Port Washington, which earlier this month featured a show with Broadway's Jarrod Spector and Kelli Barrett. That night was the first time patrons had seen the theater's new seats – removable for those concerts where everyone is on their feet and dancing.

And people seem ready to dance. "We all collectively did the work to stay safe and get through" Omicron, Reynolds said. "Now we have to get out there as a community and support our businesses."

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The Uber of the skies?



Courtesy of Breeze Airways

Breeze Airways Chairman and CEO, David Neeleman.

Flights from Long Island MacArthur Airport to New Orleans beginning in May. A flight exclusively for the Kentucky Derby.

Suddenly, travel possibilities are even more abundant. This is thanks to the addition of Breeze Airways, whose chairman and CEO, David Neeleman founded JetBlue Airways.

Neeleman said Breeze's inaugural routes from MacArthur comprise popular destinations Norfolk, VA, and Charleston, SC, beginning this month. Flights from MacArthur spare Long Island travelers the hassle of driving to LaGuardia or JFK, especially for those with second homes and like to golf, and travel frequently.

The combination of MacArthur and the airline's initial routes "seemed like a really logical fit for us," he told LIBN.

Why travel Breeze?

"It's just easy. And our fares are really low, too," he said. "You can book it, and if something comes up, you can change or cancel" online.

"We're a tech company that likes to fly airplanes," he said. Likening the company to Uber, Neeleman said people can plan or change their trip without "waiting on the phone for hours."

And, like with Derby Day, the airline will look to offer other possible flights designed around events.

News of Breeze Airways flights out of MacArthur comes just months after Southwest Airlines kicked off service to Nashville, TN.

"In each month of the year, we marked important accomplishments due to lots of hard work and dedication to better serving our community," said Airport Commissioner Shelley LaRose-Arken.

Here's a look at MacArthur's 2021 highlights.

January	Nominated for USA Today's 10 Best Readers' Choice Awards, Best Small Airport.	March	Southwest announces upcoming Nashville non-stop flights.
February	USA Today's 10 Best Readers' Choice Awards voting places MacArthur as the country's fourth best Small Airport, up two spots from 2020.	April	Online marketing campaign to support Nashville flights, raise brand awareness of airport, and welcome back airport customers for summer.
		May	Airport strengthens strategic relationship with Long Island Ducks with Lucky Seat Saturday sponsorship and awards nine pairs of roundtrip tickets to Nashville on Southwest Airlines' new route.
		June	Airport hosts Air Force Thunderbirds for Bethpage Federal Credit Union Air Show.
		July	Southwest's Nashville service kicks off with onsite WJVC broadcast. Bay Shore Restaurant Committee Nashville Thursdays promotion begins.
		August	Southwest Airlines celebrates 50th anniversary.
		September	Airport awards four pairs of tickets to Nashville through Bay Shore Nashville Thursdays raffle.
		October	Rehabilitation of Runway 15R/33L improves infrastructure, provides jobs.
		November	Taxiway E and F improvement project work begins.
		December	Blue/Point Brewpub opens. HIA-LI Travel Survey results released.

New airport entrance/welcome sign unveiled. Airport retailer Paradises employee presented with company's 2021 Presidential Leadership Award. Breeze Airways announces MacArthur as its first new city since the carrier's initial launch.