

## Jersey guys came to change Atlantic City

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ATLANTIC CITY — Sitting in private room of Council Oak Fish, Joseph Jingoli and Jack Morris had just a few minutes Thursday afternoon to relax.

With the Boardwalk as a backdrop behind them, the quiet serenity of the room was a million miles away from the raucous energy inside the Hard Rock LIVE at Etes Arena a few hours earlier when the two were on stage smashing guitars with celebrities during the grand opening festivities of Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Atlantic City.

As part of the investment group behind the \$500 million renovation of the former Trump Taj Mahal, Jingoli and Morris round out a powerhouse New Jersey-quartet responsible for the casino hotel, which includes Hard Rock International Chairman Jim Allen and Hard Rock Atlantic City Property President Matt Harkness. Their direct ties to New Jersey and the South Jersey region are a major reason why the two developers bet big on Atlantic City when all signs pointed toward the investment being folly.

"Wall Street didn't want to touch Atlantic City," said Morris, CEO and president of Piscataway-based Edgewood Properties. "Timing is everything and the time was right. We found the right partners. Without Jim Allen, without Hard Rock, without the Seminole Tribe, make no mistake about it, we wouldn't be sitting here today."

Morris, a Highland Park, Middlesex County, native, has made significant investments to development in New Brunswick, Brick and Somerville. Edgewood Properties is currently working on Towne Place at Garden State Park, a mixed-use project on the site of the former racetrack in Cherry Hill. The company was also approved to build a 32,000-square foot restaurant and retail space called Nantucket Galloway on the White Horse Pike with construction expected to begin this year.

Jingoli, who along with brother Michael, runs Joseph Jingoli & Son, Inc., the contracting and development firm behind the Stockton University Gateway project set to open this fall on the Boardwalk. The businessman also spearheaded a transition of the state's drug court program to being renamed recovery court in Atlantic and Cape May counties and has advocated hiring graduates of the program in casinos.

A former Atlantic City resident himself, Jingoli said one of the resort's most attractive assets is the people. He said finding talented and capable employees from a local pool for both the construction project and the casino was "the easiest thing in the world."

"We have a 20-year relationship here in Atlantic City," Jingoli said. "Over those 20 years, we have met cooperative residents (and) we've recruited a very loyal, trainable workforce in energy, construction and now in gaming. What was written and what the reality of Atlantic City, about the people here, are very different."

Jingoli and Morris said that when Hard Rock was hosting hiring events prior to the June 28 opening, they requested that recruiters take a hard look at Atlantic City residents. The result is that nearly 25 percent of the casino hotel's 3,700-plus employees are city residents.

"Atlantic City has a very viable workforce," Jingoli said. "There was no magic needed."

Morris said the gratitude from the employees is "emotional" for him.

"It's so inspiring to hear and it's very touching to me, personally," he said. "We appreciate the fact that people work hard for us and we want them, each and every one of them, to know that."

The personal connection the two self-described "Jersey guys" have to the city and its residents are the driving force behind their determination to succeed where others have failed.

"We didn't come to Atlantic City to open another casino (or) to reopen a closed casino," Morris said. "We came here to change the city. And I think that we've taken the first step toward doing that."

Morris added that with the power of the Hard Rock brand and the media attention on Atlantic City, the perception of the resort will begin to change. He said the attention and success of the city will eventually force others to step up and meet the demand because that's what people will begin to expect.

"Not only in New Jersey, or the entire United States of America, but I think around the world, people are going to see that Atlantic City is alive and well," Morris said. "And they're going to continue to see a change in Atlantic City because people are going to have to compete to a higher standard that they didn't have to before."

Jingoli said the group is not done in Atlantic City. But before any new projects begin to form, the focus is delivering on the promise of Hard Rock.

"The only pressure is on us to deliver a world-class product," he said. "It's on us to be the change-agent that's disruptive to the status quo."