

## Farm market proposed for Parkway rest stop

Written by Bill Barlow

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### But plans for restaurant, amenities remain uncertain

OCEAN VIEW – The South Jersey Economic Development District is looking for farmers.

The state agency plans to create two Jersey Fresh market stands, including one on the Garden State Parkway at the Ocean View rest stop at about mile 18. The other would be in Egg Harbor City.

“Now, this is all very preliminary for us,” said Monica Kyle, an administrative assistant at the SJEDD. “We might be a little late getting the word out, but I hope we’re not.”

The SJEDD is a governmental agency aimed at building the economy in Atlantic, Cumberland, Salem and Cape May counties. This week, the group issued a press release looking for vendors interested in participating in a fresh produce market at the rest stop and at the New Jersey Transit train station in Egg Harbor City. They are looking for vendors with a Jersey Fresh designation to set up shop from 2 to 6 p.m. Thursdays and from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturdays beginning July 7.

“We discussed the Jersey Fresh market stand concept with representatives at the service area to find out which days and times the area has the most activity. The goal is to provide Jersey Fresh fruits and vegetables to visitors and residents traveling past the Ocean View Service Area in Cape May County,” said Gordon K. Dahl, the executive director of the organization.

According to Kyle, the district is for now just gauging interest. If enough potential vendors step forward, there could be a market in place this summer, but there are no guarantees.

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The crew working at the information center at the rest stop said the project would be welcome if it takes off.

Christie Ostrander, one of the travel counselors at the welcome center, run by the state Division of Travel and Tourism, said they have heard a number of rumors about plans for the site, but so far there has been little solid information.

"It's a very frustrating situation," she said. The visitors who stop on their way to the shore points in Cape May County don't want much, she said, just a place to get a cup of coffee and an easy snack, along with clean restrooms. "If we had a dime for every time someone came in and asked for a cup of coffee, we'd be millionaires."

She said she thought the farm market was an excellent idea.

The rest stop was home to Cape May County's only Roy Rogers restaurant for years, until it closed in October of 2009. While thousands of people come through the rest stop each year, the restaurant was losing money, and in the off season was often empty.

"You can't make somebody stay if they're not making money," said Diane Wieland, Cape May County director of tourism. The county has no direct connection to the Parkway welcome center, but she has made it a project to get some kind of food service in place there.

According to Ostrander, 68,000 people a year come to the information center, and she guessed that was about a quarter of the number who come in to the rest area. Most of that traffic is from April to October, she said, and the center has been crowded on weekends so far this season. She said Memorial Day weekend was one of the busiest she's seen.

For now, the rest stop has a men's and a women's room, a bank of vending machines, and a dining area where the Roy Rogers once stood, in the same building as the information center, which has its own entrance as well as a door to the rest of the building. There is also a gas

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station, which recently changed to Sunoco. It will have its first summer at the site this year.

Tom Feeney, the spokesman for the New Jersey Turnpike Authority, which runs the Parkway, said in an email that there are no plans for a restaurant at the stop this summer, and that he had no further information about plans for a market, beyond what the SJEDD announced.

He said the Brookdale North service plaza in Essex County also has a café that has been vacant for a couple of years, and at that stop, safety concerns meant the authority had to close the restrooms down as well.

“We are able to keep the restrooms open at Ocean View, at least on a limited basis,” he said.

The rest stop is operated by HMS Host, a food and beverage service company focused on travelers. According to Ostrander, there are eight years left on the contract. The company’s website lists five properties on the Garden State Parkway as among its operations, although it does not mention Ocean View. It also runs 12 stops on the New Jersey Turnpike and the rest stop on the Atlantic City Expressway in Hammonton, and has operations in airports in the US, Canada, Europe, Egypt and Asia. No one from the company was available to discuss the plans for the rest stop.

Wieland suggested they may be reluctant to talk about plans because “they know it’s a work in progress.

“They’re working on it,” she said. “It’s definitely on the radar.”

She cited Veronique “Ronnie” Hakim, named the executive director of the highway authority in September, saying she was working to improve the services at the only Cape May County rest stop, as is Grace Hanlon, the director for the state’s division of travel and tourism. According to Wieland, Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno is also involved.

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So what would Wieland call success at the rest stop?

She said she would like to see the bathrooms open longer – they close at 5 p.m. each day – and to have basic amenities, including coffee as Ostrander suggests.

Wieland wants something to happen soon, before visitors lose the habit of stopping at the center. Don't expect a cappuccino and a hot dog this summer, though.

“We are not going to see it this year, but things are in motion,” she said.

Wieland added that her department plans a special tourist event for July 1, welcoming visitors to the county.

Bill Barlow can be emailed at [bbarlow@catamaranmedia.com](mailto:bbarlow@catamaranmedia.com), or you can comment on this story by calling 624-8900, ext. 250.

