A year after Taj Mahal closure, Atlantic City has a different feeling

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ATLANTIC CITY — When the Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort closed its doors for good, it signaled the continuation of one of the darkest eras in the history of the city.

A year ago Tuesday, at 5:59 a.m., the Taj Mahal closed after a bitter labor dispute between Carl Ichan, owner of property, and Unite Here Local 54.

The closing put more than 2,000 people out of work and added more misery to a city already on the brink of financial collapse. The shutdown of the property once owned by President Donald J. Trump capped a two-year period that saw five casinos close and the elimination of more than 10,000 jobs.

Hours after the property closed, Ichan called it "a sad day for the Atlantic City."

A year later, talk of casinos closing has been replaced by optimism with the future opening of the Stockton University's Gateway Project and Hard Rock's new casino planned at the Taj's Boardwalk site in 2018.

Bob McDevitt, president of Local 54, said he still remembers getting to the Boardwalk during the early morning of Oct. 10, 2016. As the property closed, people leaving the property on the Boardwalk were greeted by a wall of sound created by more than 300 members of the union beating homemade drums and shouting, "Shut it down."

"I had mixed feelings about that day when I woke up, but the amount of people that showed up was uplifting," McDevitt said. "The enthusiasm that they showed that morning was amazing."

For McDevitt, the closing of the property, once known as the "Eighth Wonder of the World," hit home. Before becoming president of the union, McDevitt worked as a banquet bartender for six years at the Taj following the opening of the property.

"Knowing I would never see some of those people again in that setting was hard," McDevitt said of his former co-workers.

Five months after the closing, Hard Rock International and investors Joe Jingoli and Jack Morris announced they had purchased the property.

Since then the group has been making a ton of changes to the property. The fountain at the front of the building has been reduced to rubble, and three of the six elephants at the corner of South Virginia and Atlantic avenues have been removed as Hard Rock renovates the property.

In summer 2018, Hard Rock is expected to open its new property. The company plans to spend $500 million renovating and rebranding the property. The project is expected to generate more than 1,000 construction jobs and 3,000 permanent jobs, according to the company.
A couple of months after Hard Rock opens, Stockton plans to open its 675,000-square-foot, $220 million Gateway Project — the new headquarters for South Jersey Gas and a campus for the university that includes an academic building, housing for more than 500 students and a parking garage.

"After the closure of the Taj, people thought the city was done again," said Mayor Don Guardian. "It's all come together. We hit our low last year, but we are starting to rebound."

Guardian said the start of construction on the Stockton campus and other projects helped contribute to the newfound optimism in the city.

"When you see construction, that is a good thing," Guardian said. "I think that has built momentum."

Ken Calemmo, chief operating officer of Cooper Levenson and co-chair of the Economic Development Committee of the Greater Atlantic City Chamber, said investors see better business opportunities a year removed from Taj closing.

"I attribute this to the fact that Atlantic City is a good business opportunity," he said. "The overall economy is stronger and steadily getting better. I believe there will be more investment interest. We need to strive to continue to make the city appealing to outside investment."