



# Before closing his family's Wonderland Pier, Ocean City Mayor Jay Gillian was on shaky financial footing

“The closing of Wonderland is not good for Ocean City,” said a citizen tax advocate.



Gillian's Wonderland Pier is pictured on Jan. 26, 2021, in Ocean City, N.J.

JOSE F. MORENO / Staff Photographer

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by Amy S. Rosenberg and Ryan W. Briggs  
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OCEAN CITY, N.J. — After Ocean City Mayor Jay Gillian announced that this season would be [the last for his family's beloved Wonderland Pier](#), shock and sadness spread throughout the Shore. No more toddlers riding the old fire engines or boat rides, no more Wacky Worm Ride or Moby Dick or Tilt-a-Whirl.

People took to Facebook to try to save the place, or part of it. “Whatever happens, the skyline NEEDS that Ferris wheel,” wrote Sue McElwee.

Many wondered: What is to become of the boardwalk landmark? Currently owned by developer Eustace Mita, whose desire for a “first-class” hotel is well-known, the property is listed in Cape May County property records as having a tax assessment as \$12,712,800.



Rides were still going on Aug. 9 amid news that Gillian's Wonderland Pier in Ocean City would close by the fall.

Amy Rosenberg / Staff

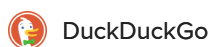
## Mounting debts

In some corners of Ocean City, some people were less surprised, noting the deteriorating condition of some rides, the curtailed hours, and the recent financial history of Wonderland. In January 2021, the amusement park [nearly went to sheriff's sale](#) before Mita, the owner of the [Icona Resorts](#), intervened. The amusement park in various forms has been in the Gillian family for 94 years. On Friday, Gillian wrote that Wonderland was “no longer a viable business.”

Gillian also has notable financial problems, both personal and related to the business, including IRS and New Jersey tax liens. And, two prominent Ocean City developers, Scott Halliday and Eustace Mita, held mortgages for Gillian on personal residences: Halliday for \$620,000 and Mita for \$1 million.

Mita is [the hotel-coveting developer](#) who has been in Ocean City for decades. In early 2023, he proposed a \$150 million hotel on city-owned land next to the pier (which Mayor Gillian opposed). He now owns the Wonderland Pier land, having spent \$10 million to bail out Gillian from the looming 2021 sheriff's sale. Eight million went to pay off Gillian's unpaid mortgage debts to First Priority Bank.

Much of this has been the subject of local mayoral elections, as candidates tried to unseat Gillian. The most recent race, in 2022, saw him winning reelection to a fourth term over Councilman Keith Hartzell, who warned that Wonderland Pier was vulnerable to future development.



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After the announcement of the closing, Hartzell said he was hopeful that Mita might incorporate rides in any future development. He cautioned that any hotel with more than 100 rooms could find a “path to alcohol” that would use state law to circumvent the dry town’s local ordinances.

“I think the park fell into disrepair, and I don’t know why it fell into disrepair,” Hartzell said.

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“I think [Mita] firmly believes the town needs a hotel,” Hartzell said. “At the same time, it needs an amusement park. Ocean City hates change. This is a devastating blow of change.”

Citing what he called the mayor’s “dire financial situation,” David Breeden, president of the Fairness in Taxes citizens group, called the situation leading up to the closure a “ticking time bomb.”

“If you have been paying attention, the closing of Gillian’s Wonderland Pier should have come as no surprise,” Breeden said, in an e-mailed statement.

“Frankly, the question is how was Mayor Gillian able to juggle the financial balls for so long,” he said. “[B]ut we know the answer to that question and it’s because of the generosity of his developer friends.”

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Gillian did not respond to several messages from a reporter, nor did developer Halliday. Mita has been open about the mortgage and the

bailing out of Wonderland. He said Friday he was as surprised as anyone when Gillian made the decision to pull the plug on Wonderland.

## Liens, mortgages, and lawsuits



Ocean City Mayor Jay Gillian speaks during the news conference at the music pier in Ocean City, N.J., on June 1, 2023. After a weekend of what Ocean City leadership are calling "un ... [Read more](#)  
Elizabeth Robertson / Staff Photographer / Elizabeth Robertson / Staff Photographer

Among Mayor Gillian's transactions cited by critics over the years:

- There was a failed amusement park venture in Sea Isle City, built with \$2.5 million of Gillian company money and closed after five years, buffeted by damage from Hurricane Sandy and an ill-considered emphasis on rides for little kids in Sea Isle. In 2009,

the year the park opened, Jay Gillian and his wife, Michele, borrowed \$1.5 million from the First Bank of Sea Isle, and are still in litigation over the remaining \$525,000 owed on the mortgage.

- In 2022, in correspondence with the Bank of Sea Isle’s attorneys, filed in the court records, Gillian attorney Michael Bohrer states that the Gillians are unable to make a \$705,000 requested payment. “It is my hope that First Bank is not so insensitive so as to cause irreparable damage to the reputation of two of Ocean City’s most prominent public figures,” Bohrer wrote, “as well as causing loss of income to the employees of Wonderland who depend on their wages to meet their day-to-day living expenses by pursuing formal collection efforts against the Gillians.” A trial date on the remaining half-million owed is scheduled for Aug. 29.
- The near-sheriff’s sale of the Wonderland property, averted in 2021, when developer Mita bought it for \$10 million, \$8 million of which went to pay off debt. Gillian’s then leased the property to operate Wonderland. Mita said Friday the ownership of the rides themselves was split.
- Meanwhile, Gillian’s latest reelection, in 2022, was financed with a \$106,000 cash donation from himself, according to election finance records.
- There were two tax liens filed against Gillian: one in 2023 by the state of New Jersey for \$973,000, and one in 2024 by the IRS for \$955,000.

- Two prominent developers in Ocean City, Halliday and Mita, the latter the current owner of the property at 600 Boardwalk, held the mortgages on personal properties of Gillian's. Both developers routinely seek permission from Ocean City government for various projects. Gillian publicly opposed Mita's past proposal for a Boardwalk hotel.
- Halliday's OC Boardwalk Ventures LLC company held a \$620,000 mortgage on a property at 30 E. Aberdeen Rd. That mortgage was paid off in 2023, when Gillian and his wife, who is head of Ocean City's Chamber of Commerce, sold to Edward Hazzouri, chairman of a prominent lobbying firm in Philadelphia. The sale price was \$3.05 million.
- Mita then provided a \$1 million mortgage for the Gillians' home in the Ocean Reef Condominium Association. Halliday also provided a mortgage for this property, for \$69,000.
- A house owned by Gillian's mother, Jean M. Simpson (Simpson was divorced from Gillian's father, Roy, and remarried to Dave Simpson, whose family owns Playland's Castaway Cove, the other amusement park on the boardwalk), was acquired by the Gillians in 2011 for \$1. Two years later, the couple sold the property to the developer Halliday for \$1.5 million. Less than two months later, Halliday resold the property for \$2.2 million to the property owner next door.

Mita says he will take the next six months to figure out what's next for the landmark Wonderland property. Most in town assume he still wants to build a hotel, which would require zoning changes from the city and other permissions. Ocean City has a mayor-council form of government, with the mayor running the administrative side, making departmental appointments and serving on the planning board (seven of whose members he also appoints). The City Council votes on ordinances and appoints zoning board members.

Breeden questioned the propriety of Gillian's financial entanglements with Halliday and Mita. He noted that "the developer who provided the \$1 million mortgage to Mayor Gillian is the same developer that has publicly stated numerous times that they want to build a boardwalk hotel that is currently not permitted under the city's existing zoning laws and inconsistent with the city's master plan.

"Only in the political world could such relationships be considered proper and appropriate," Breeden noted.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

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