

Grand Prix was boom or bust for eateries

By Rachel Bernstein, *The Daily Record*, September 6, 2011

City restaurateurs say the Baltimore Grand Prix brought record-breaking business to eateries within walking distance of the race course, but operators of establishments at greater distances say their sales suffered significantly.

Baltimore officials expected the three-day race festival during Labor Day weekend to bring in more than 100,000 visitors and millions of dollars to restaurants and hotels around the downtown area.

Baltimore Racing Development LLC Assistant General Manager Lonnie Fisher said he expects attendance figures, which will be released Thursday, to beat projections.

Judi DiGioia, sales and marketing manager for Morton's The Steakhouse at Conway and Charles streets, said the restaurant's wait staff was happy to come in extra early and stay downtown for the weekend for the increase in gratuities and tips.

"To feel really good about it, it really speaks volumes," DiGioia said.

The restaurant set up a stand outside its front doors and sold steak sandwiches and beverages to race fans. DiGioia said the restaurant sold at least 1,300 steak sandwiches and was nearly sold out all three nights of the festival.

Ray Jones, assistant manager for Regi's American Bistro in Federal Hill, said business was up over last year's Labor Day weekend by almost 30 percent.

"It wasn't our normal crowd per se, but we were expecting to be pretty busy," Jones said.

The restaurant increased its staff and inventory in preparation for the weekend, and it paid off, Jones said. The restaurant, which seats about 80, typically loses its neighborhood crowd during the holiday weekend because locals go to the beach or on vacation for the last warm weekend of the year, he said.

"Some of it was hit or miss," said Baltimore City Council member William H. Cole IV, who represents much of the Inner Harbor area. "This is where it was kind of mystifying. I think some of it we can work on improving next year, to help restaurants market themselves to race fans. I can't quite get a read on why some areas were really hot."

Cole said that businesses untouched by the Grand Prix effect still couldn't have done worse than a typical Labor Day weekend in Baltimore, which is usually one of the slowest tourism weekends for the city.

Scotti Offutt, marketing manager for Ryleigh's Oyster in Federal Hill, said that while the daytime crowd was slow for the restaurant, it was worth it to have the doubled wait staff for evening shifts.

Offutt said that media coverage predicting bad traffic for drivers downtown had kept people away from the area.

"It definitely affected us not so fabulously," she said. "During the night it turned around."

But Little Italy restaurant owners said the area was a ghost town and business was worse than a usual Labor Day weekend for them.

Milan on Eastern Avenue lost reservations because many patrons thought traffic would be too congested to drive into the city, said owner Curlee Smittie Jr.

The restaurant's sales were down 30 percent from last year's Labor Day weekend, he said. On Saturday, the restaurant didn't have a guest until 9 p.m., Smittie said.

Milan wasn't the only restaurant hurting in the area.

"As of right now, I talked to 15 businesses around here, and I haven't heard one success story," Smittie said.

Friday was completely empty for Max's Empanadas on South High Street, said owner Maximiliano Gonzalez.

Gonzalez said his restaurant did worse than on a regular Labor Day weekend, and much of that was from media reports about bad traffic. He said city officials did little to promote the Little Italy area and that better advertising would help in the future.

"It's a learning process, I guess," Gonzalez said.