

## Progress at NARTP means renewed focus on aviation education for South Jersey

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Beyond the boardwalk and sandy beaches, nestled in the Pinelands a few miles from Atlantic City is a single building that took nearly 10 years to build and that local officials hope will mean the beginning of a new future for Atlantic County residents.

“We’re redefining the area,” said Howard Kyle, chief of staff for Atlantic County, who has been deeply involved with the Atlantic County Economic Alliance (ACEA) in the development of the National Aviation Research and Technology Park (NARTP) in Egg Harbor Township.

Once complete, the ACEA hopes the NARTP will nearly double the well-paid aviation workforce in the region and is getting local educators on board to train those potential employees.

It’s not new that that Atlantic County officials hope to establish an aviation hub in the region – that has been in the works for more than a decade. But the recent announcement of a partnership with Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University that would help to build out the educational and workforce development components of that future hub has sparked new excitement in a county most known for its tourism and hospitality industry.

“It is a very exciting time for Atlantic County, without a doubt the most important thing we can do to diversify the county’s economy,” said Atlantic County Institute of Technology Superintendent Phil Guenther. “What we’re looking at at ACIT is our role in preparing the workforce to take advantage of the opportunities available.”

Last month, the county announced that area superintendents were meeting with Embry-Riddle to discuss development of an aviation STEM program in the local high schools where students could earn college credit. Embry-Riddle has already signed on to plan an adult aviation maintenance and technical academy, working closely with Atlantic Cape Community College, which also has its own aviation program.

Kyle said the aviation STEM program for high schools is still in the conceptual phase and they are regularly meeting to develop it, but educators are excited.

“We’re in an age where STEM-type jobs are at a premium and we don’t have enough trained and skilled workers in order to get into the field and continue in the field,” Atlantic County Executive Superintendent of School Robert Bumpus said. “As an educator I’m really excited about politicians talking about that, realizing that good sound education means a lot for the area that the industry is in.”

ACIT has been preparing for the growth of the aviation industry for several years. Guenther said the county vocational high school unveiled its own aviation academy three years ago in partnership with Atlantic Cape.

“That program is designed to really give a high school student a broad perspective of all the careers available in the aviation industry,” Guenther said. “Our goal is that they’ll come back and contribute to the aviation industry in Atlantic County.”

ACIT is also looking to build out an aviation maintenance program for about 100 high school students through the recently approved statewide bond referendum to expand county vocational schools. Guenther said the program would be aligned with the adult program planned for NARTP.

Last year, the ACEA put the finishing touches on exterior of the first building in NARTP. The park is located next door to the Atlantic City International Airport and the William J. Hughes Federal Aviation Administration Technical Center, which combined employ nearly 3,000 people.

The park, which they anticipate will house seven buildings in total and about 2,000 employees, has gone through several incarnations in the last decade. If you ask some of those involved with it now, they aren't keen to talk about the park's history and would much rather focus on the future.

"A good idea badly executed doesn't make it a bad idea," said Kyle, who sits on the board for the National Aviation and Research Technology Park.

The 56,000-square-foot first building is in the midst of fit-out for its tenants now. The building's centerpiece, the high-tech Thunder Room conference center for tenants and members of the public, is complete. The remainder of the three-story building will house the Federal Aviation Administration and the New Jersey Innovation Institute, which is providing management and consulting services. ThunderBolt Engineering Company led by former park director Joseph Sheairs will occupy another space, and a yet-to-be announced company the fourth area.

As part of its contract, New Jersey Innovation Institute (NJII), a corporation of the New Jersey Institute of Technology, will also be involved in developing a separate aviation STEM initiatives with local high schools.

County Executive Dennis Levinson said that while tourism is a large part of the local economy, the aviation industry has the ability to provide long-term, high-paying jobs for the future.

Levinson said that that public officials and politicians have always talked about diversifying the economy and adding more high paying jobs.

"Now were actually doing something about," he said. "We truly believe this is the future for our area. Tourism jobs are great, but they're seasonal, they're low paying."

Bumpus said plans to increase aviation STEM education should include reaching middle school students, as well, who will need to increase their skills to be able to take the math and science classes necessary to be a part of the programs that will lead to future careers.

"Our kids are pretty much native in terms of using technology but they don't have it focused on career pathways," he said. "We want to channel that in a direction that's going to mean a really good career."

Bumpus said the schools need to work together, not separately, to build out programs in aviation.

"I know what can happen when good people get around something like this and begin to deepen their understanding and then begin to apply," Bumpus said. "That's what we're talking about, and one step at a time."