

Opinion: Focus on positive in Atlantic County aviation development incentives

A key piece of a decade-long effort to develop an aviation industry to help diversity Atlantic County's tourism economy finally fell into place this month. Gov. Phil Murphy signed into law a Grow New Jersey zone that includes Atlantic City International Airport, the William J. Hughes FAA Tech Center and the new National Aviation Research and Technology Park.

This will allow the Atlantic County Economic Alliance to offer some of the state's most lucrative economic-development incentives to companies to locate there.

The incentives could have come earlier and could have been better. Murphy conditionally vetoed the growth-zone bill and insisted on weakening the final version.

The program is good only until July of next year instead of the original four years and may not be renewed under Murphy's overhaul of development incentives. Companies getting the incentives must not only create and maintain a certain number of jobs, but they must be certain kinds of jobs as well, reducing the program's appeal.

The area didn't get all it wanted but got a lot. Perhaps the shorter window for the Grow New Jersey program will motivate companies already drawn to the FAA center and underutilized airport to strike while the iron's hot.

The day after Murphy signed the revised bill, the aviation plan got another big boost with the five-year reauthorization of the FAA. Rep. Frank LoBiondo, who has been critical to keeping and growing the tech center during his congressional career that will end this year, said the reauthorization includes millions of dollars for additional facilities at the Hughes Tech Center.

The funding is expected to support research into fulfilling FAA oversight of unmanned aircraft such as drones, including integrating them into the national airspace. That will boost Atlantic County's appeal to aviation interests and may have benefits for Cape May County's airport as well, which has been popular for drone testing.

The region's leaders and residents should be grateful for these efforts to expand the local economy, which suffered a mini-depression from the double whammy of casino hotel closings and the severe national recession from 2007 to 2009. There's reason to believe that if they had been more grateful for such help before, they would have gotten the stronger aviation development incentives and for four years.

The late state Sen. Jim Whelan had sponsored the original Grow New Jersey aviation bill, and had worked with then Gov. Chris Christie on a broad bipartisan plan to rescue Atlantic City, clean it up and boost the area's economy.

Local leaders, organizations and even fellow Republicans attacked Christie over the central part of that plan — the state takeover of the finances of nearly bankrupt Atlantic City and much of city government authority. The takeover turned out to be successful in stabilizing the city and making substantial investment in it possible, including two major new casino hotels.

On his last day in office, Christie pocket-vetoed the aviation zone bill. That left its approval in the hands of Murphy, who insisted on the weaker version that became law.

A better focus on what's positive for Atlantic City and the county might have resulted in the original, better aviation incentives. As ever, the way to a better future is to understand what it would be and to figure out realistically how to get there.