

# Sweeney wants Port Authority takeover of Atlantic City International Airport

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State Senate President Steve Sweeney wants the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to take over Atlantic City International Airport, to expand flights and aviation services in Atlantic County, sources close to the Gloucester County legislator said Tuesday.

Other political leaders said they are on board with the idea if it results in more flights and better use of the large, underutilized airport in Egg Harbor Township.

“Steve Sweeney is working on it and asked if I would help and be supportive,” said U.S. Rep. Jeff Van Drew, D-2nd. “Of course, it gives the ability to almost reinvent the Atlantic City airport with more carriers. That’s something we have always wanted to do.”

But the South Jersey Transportation Authority, which now runs the airport, is not involved in talks, according to a spokesman.

“Contrary to recent media accounts, the South Jersey Transportation Authority (SJTA), owner/operator of the Atlantic City International Airport (ACY), has not been in nor is in any active discussions with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey for their purchase of the airport,” said Mark Amorosi, SJTA communications manager, in response to questions.

The Port Authority did not comment.

No new legislation would be required, as a 2007 law allows the Port Authority to take over one airport in each state that is outside its geographical jurisdiction.

The Port Authority runs the major New York City airports and Newark International Airport, and many hope it would be able to divert flights to Atlantic City, as well as bring aviation maintenance and repair operations here.

From 2013 to the end of 2017 the SJTA paid the Port Authority \$500,000 a year to provide general management services, but it did not result in greater use of the airport. That agreement ended by mutual decision in December 2017, according to that year’s SJTA annual report.

That management agreement did not turn over all control of the airport to the Port Authority, while this effort would be a true takeover, said sources close to Sweeney.

The Port Authority management brought United Airlines flights to Atlantic City in 2013, but the airline stopped service after just seven months.

Sources also said that turmoil in the Port Authority under former Gov. Chris Christie — including during the Bridgewater scandal — contributed to lost opportunities for Atlantic City. The agency now has regained stability and its leaders have good working relationships, they said.

Christie ally and Former Port Authority Chairman David Samson, whose law firm Wolff & Samson (now Chiesa Shahanian & Giantomasi) represented the SJTA, was sentenced to house arrest, community service and a \$100,000 fine in 2016.

He pleaded guilty to using his chairmanship to withhold approval of United Airlines getting a wide-body hangar at Newark airport, to force the airline to run a money-losing route from Newark to Columbia, South Carolina, near his vacation home.

Called the “chairman’s flight,” United discontinued it after Samson resigned in 2014. That is also the year the Atlantic City flights stopped.

The Port Authority took over New York Stewart International in Orange County, in the southern Hudson Valley. The takeover brought international flights through Norwegian Airlines service there, said Atlantic County Executive Dennis Levinson.

Van Drew said talks with the Port Authority and the SJTA are in the early stages, and have not yet gotten into details such as who would be responsible for the airport’s debt.

The Port Authority runs Newark International Airport, John F. Kennedy International Airport in Queens, New York City, the busiest air passenger entry point to North America; and LaGuardia International Airport, also in Queens; along with Teterboro Airport in Bergen County and Stewart. Van Drew said there may be some potential for ACY to take some of the excess traffic.

“It’s worthy of making an effort ... as long as North Jersey is mindful of South Jersey’s needs, and of the wonderful work the county is doing,” said Van Drew.

Atlantic County has built the first stage of the National Aviation Research and Technology Park at the airport, and is working with Embry-Riddle University, Atlantic Cape Community College and the county’s superintendents to develop training programs for jobs in the aviation industry.

“It’s an excellent opportunity right now to turn this airport into a world-class facility,” Levinson said. “As I’ve said all along, the Atlantic City airport is underutilized.”

The airport is connected to the Federal Aviation Administration and it’s the premier test facility in the world, Levinson said.

“So under those circumstances, we would certainly entertain a conversation,” Levinson said. “If they would focus on air passengers, air cargo and air maintenance and repair, it would be a boon for Atlantic County and all of South Jersey — for the whole corridor.”

Gov. Phil Murphy signed legislation last fall establishing the area within a one-mile radius of the airport as a Garden State Growth Zone, making businesses that relocate there eligible for tax breaks. But the growth zones expire in July.

SJTA board member James “Sonny” McCullough, the former Egg Harbor Township mayor, said there have been no discussions of the idea at an SJTA board meeting.

“The only reason the Port Authority would have any advantage, would be if it were able to entice a major airline to locate at Atlantic City — encourage more use of the airport,” said McCullough, “because of their affiliation with Newark.”

McCullough said that would be critical to conventions in Atlantic City, and to the resort's business.