

Atlantic City Mayor Gilliam reflects on 'whirlwind' first 100 days

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ATLANTIC CITY — Mayor Frank M. Gilliam Jr.'s first 100 days in office have been unlike any other in the city's history.

Gilliam is the first — and many hope the last — Atlantic City mayor to take the oath of office with the state of New Jersey fully in charge of the resort's finances. The long, wide shadow of Trenton peering over the mayor's shoulder since Jan. 1 is not lost on the 47-year-old city native, but Gilliam acknowledges there has been a benefit.

“The city is strapped for cash,” Gilliam said Friday during an exclusive interview with The Press of Atlantic City. “And when the state comes in and actually puts revenue in the budget to help balance the budget, we can't say that the state doesn't do anything.”

The controversial 2016 state takeover of Atlantic City was a focal point of the 2017 election, both in the primary and the general. Gilliam, a Democrat, edged out City Council President Marty Small Sr. in the primary and Republican incumbent Don Guardian, both of whom were vociferous opponents of the takeover.

The mayor said he does not like the state being in control of the city's finances — he referred to it as “plantation-style” government — but added that the manner in which the takeover was received by the previous administration was “not the way that you create a good working relationship.”

Gilliam said he is “optimistic” about the future of the state's role in Atlantic City under Gov. Phil Murphy, who has shifted his position from returning control back to city officials as a gubernatorial candidate to a more measured “partnership” view as chief executive. Gilliam said he will be patient with Murphy, who hasn't hit his own 100-day mark after being sworn in as New Jersey's 56th governor Jan. 16.

“I understand that, for me, Atlantic City is the most important, but, for them, they have other entities, municipalities and situations that they have to deal with,” Gilliam said. “I have this saying, ‘My hands may be tied for the moment, but my feet still work.’ I'm going to keep moving the city in the direction that it needs to go in.”

The biggest step in front of the mayor is the city's impending budget for 2018. Last year, the state crafted a budget that resulted in no property-tax increase for city residents for the first time in more than a decade. Gilliam said his administration meets almost weekly with Timothy Cunningham, director of the state's Division of Local Government Services and chairman of the Local Finance Board, to put together a budget for this year that has the same result for residents.

“We've been very active in making sure that we've been part of the budgetary process,” Gilliam said. “We're pushing to make sure that there's no tax increases because we realize that Atlantic City can't afford another tax increase.”

One factor in keeping taxes under control was the issuance of bonds — \$55 million worth — which was approved by City Council in February to pay down deferred pension and health care obligations dating to 2015. At the time, Gilliam opposed the bonding. But, after the state announced it had recently sold \$49 million in bonds to make the deferred payments, Gilliam said the Council's action was the right one. The mayor signed off on those bonds prior to Friday's deadline.

"I'm not a reactionary person," he said about the initial reluctance to the bonding proposal. "I'm just not going to do something because someone says that this is what we should be doing."

Gilliam said he sees the limitless potential of the resort, which he believes has not been capitalized on in many years. He points to investment projects big and small happening all over the city as proof that others see what he does. He also thinks new and creative solutions need to be embraced if the city is to prosper.

To that end, Gilliam is high on legalizing recreational cannabis. After taking a trip to Las Vegas early in his tenure, the mayor said there was much to be learned from how Sin City — whose own legal marijuana structure is less than a year old — is handling the situation and apply those lessons to America's Playground. For one, Gilliam said Atlantic City would need to figure out a way to keep consumers in the resort, not just be "a pusher" to those looking to buy and leave. He said social clubs or boutique hotels that cater to cannabis consumers is something the resort should look at.

But the elephant in the room is the potential money legalization would bring in, both in terms of taxes and sales. Gilliam said it was also a matter of public health and safety because legalization would allow law enforcement to focus on more harmful activities, offer an alternative to opioid and heroin addiction treatment, and reduce the unbalanced application of drug laws on minority communities.

"Not only do we need the revenue, we need to be socially responsible," he said.

And while the mayor has his eye on the future, Gilliam's 100-day tenure in City Hall has not been without controversy. His campaign was accused of manipulating absentee ballots and, recently, his time has been overshadowed by allegations of theft of a campaign check that caused a very public split with city Democrats. Neither issue has amounted to anything more than bad publicity for the mayor.

But Gilliam said his role as the "face of Atlantic City" is to continue focusing on the positives and drowning out distractions from outside forces.

"We've always (talked about) what Atlantic City isn't — we need to talk about what Atlantic City can be," he said. "I think that the potential of Atlantic City is (second) to none. ... I believe Atlantic City is poised to have the rebirth that we're actually seeing right before our eyes."

Gilliam will join Lt. Gov. Sheila Oliver on May 9 at Boardwalk Hall to deliver the State of the City address.

"Atlantic City is poised for nothing but greatness," Gilliam said. "It's up to us to capitalize on that."