

Atlantic County could be leader in smart-airport-technology development, says Joseph Ingemi

Joseph Ingemi For The Press

The sky is the limit. For most, this cliché probably is best reserved for a motivational poster. However, here in Atlantic County, it captures a key component of our economic development strategy. With the FAA Technical Center, the National Aviation Research and Technology Park (NARTP) and Atlantic City International Airport (ACY), as well as Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst to the North and the Cape May Drone Testing Center to the South, Atlantic County has the capacity to become a global leader in aerospace, aviation and defense. For this reason, the Atlantic County Economic Alliance (ACEA), where I serve as board secretary, continues to work with its public- and private-sector partners to bring this idea into reality.

Of particular note is the potential of the airport. ACY is a relatively large but under-utilized facility. Some of the “low-hanging fruit” for further utilization includes expanding air cargo capacity and providing airplane maintenance. The ACEA is working towards these goals by engaging air cargo providers and partnering with Atlantic County and Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University to develop a plan for an air maintenance training academy as part of an Atlantic County aviation innovation hub. However, we also want to reach beyond these more immediate targets. Our goal is for the airport to become a development center for smart airport technology.

Smart airports include the implementation of the internet of things (IOT) in an airport setting. Simply put, the Internet of Things is creating a network of sensors and technologies that allow for automated processes that can react to a given situation with or without human input. Some common non-airport examples of IOT include products like Amazon’s Alexa, Google Nest and driverless cars. Smart airports might include tarmacs where baggage is delivered and planes refueled through automation (Deloitte, Flying Smarter, 2019). Another application digitally connects maintenance crews with grounds inspections and a GPS functionality to improve upkeep (Deloitte). Ultimately, the goal of IOT is to increase productivity, which means faster, better quality delivery of services at a lower cost. It is hard to imagine facilities that require a greater productivity boost than the nation’s airports.

Should ACY become a hub for smart airport technology development, Atlantic County would be providing this productivity-enhancing innovation globally and enjoy the benefits of investment and economic growth that come with it. For this reason, the ACEA has worked with its partners to have the ACY designated a smart airport technology testbed. The ACEA has also applied for a U.S. Economic Development Authority grant with multiple partners to develop the necessary incubators, accelerators and partnerships to create this hub.

Most importantly, Atlantic County residents must share in this success as the entrepreneurs, developers, researchers and suppliers that drive this smart technology. This can only be achieved by developing a highly trained workforce. To develop the needed workforce, the ACEA and Atlantic County have also partnered with Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University to bring an aviation focused, STEM intensive curriculum to local school districts.

Participating students will take Embry-Riddle designed courses with an opportunity to earn college credits and various aviation certifications prior to high school graduation. Those who are successful may find immediate

work in the aviation industry or save time and money by subtracting a year or two from their undergraduate studies. To further create an incentive for these students to return to the area after college, hands-on learning programs will be positioned at the FAA and the NARTP so students can meet potential employers.

The path forward is not without challenges, including uncertainty about the state tax-incentive programs, a contentious federal budget process and an overall feeling of complacency by far too many. But there is much reason to be optimistic. The ACEA is helping to move Atlantic County in new directions. Residents and businesses should look forward to Atlantic County being an economic engine where all may flourish.

Joseph Ingemi, of Hammonton, is secretary to the Board of Trustees of the Atlantic County Economic Alliance – a private sector-directed, nonprofit economic development corporation that was established for business attraction, retention and marketing efforts in Atlantic County.