

## Opinion: Oliver's right, New Jersey oversight of Atlantic City should be renewed

When Atlantic City was facing bankruptcy, state government's bipartisan rescue plan authorized a takeover of city finances for five years.

Many city officials opposed ceding any power to the state and for them the plan was five years too long. But other state and local officials said five years wouldn't be long enough to turn the city around.

The latter have turned out to be correct. As Lt. Gov. Sheila Oliver said recently, state oversight of Atlantic City should continue past the term of the 2016 Municipal Stabilization and Recovery Act in order to finish the job.

Much progress has been made, especially in city finances. The annual city operating budget has been reduced by 11.5% since 2016, and twice municipal property taxes have been decreased.

Oliver, who is also commissioner of the Department of Community Affairs that's responsible for the effort in Atlantic City, said local leaders have gotten better at focusing on what is important in the budget and securing financial resources for it.

She outlined several state priorities for Atlantic City that will need more time to accomplish. Among them are more economic development, improved public health, more home ownership, restoring the appeal of Atlantic and Pacific avenues, enhancing social services and continuing the reorganization and reform of public safety.

These mirror the seven pillars of the plan to restore the city developed in 2018 by Jim Johnson, special counsel to Gov. Murphy on Atlantic City. These included rebuilding the strength of the casinos, boosting job opportunities, improving public safety and its perception, addressing disparities in the health of residents, better planning and developing of the city, making the needs of youth central to restoration efforts and creating an effective and durable city government.

The state's efforts have clearly benefited city residents, and local officials have responded by supporting the revitalization project. Two city council members recently completed training in a program to connect residents — especially those most at risk from or prone to violence — with services and skills training to help them and improve public safety.

For its part, the state has gone out of its way to reach out to all segments and factions in the city. When Oliver lauded Mayor Marty Small Sr. for his work toward the common goals of state and city, she also praised his predecessor, Frank Gilliam Jr. We take her kind words for a corrupt former mayor awaiting federal sentencing as a signal to city residents that no one need be left behind.

New Jersey's support is especially needed and welcome following the damage to the city economy and local employment during the pandemic.

The Legislature should get to work soon on enabling Atlantic City's recovery to continue.