

A more focused, balanced approach for CRDA?: Our view

Casino Reinvestment Development Authority board members have been doing some soul searching lately as they look for ways to help Atlantic City using their reduced, but still sizable, funds.

It can be frustrating to watch a 40-year-old organization that still hasn't found its higher purpose, but the recent internal debates among CRDA members are still preferred to the past, free-spending ways. It's also worthwhile work that needs to be done if the authority is ever to accomplish its mission of redeveloping Atlantic City into a first-class community for its residents and visitors.

Recent CRDA decisions, such as cutting the financial lifeline to the Miss America Organization and the rethinking of a plan to spend \$10.5 million renovating Jim Whelan Boardwalk Hall as office space for the Atlantic City Board of Education, show a maturation in the board's thinking.

These tough calls have not come without struggle and growing pains.

Recently, some among CRDA officials have suggested the authority needs more avenues to spend its money. Currently CRDA's luxury tax revenue — collected on hotel rooms, alcohol and ticket sales — must be focused on marketing, debt service, maintenance and construction at Jim Whelan Boardwalk Hall and the Atlantic City Convention Center.

That seems unnecessarily narrow. The CRDA should look to the original law that created it:

NJSA 5:12-160 – “The purposes of the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority shall be to: a) maintain public confidence in the casino gaming industry as a unique tool of urban redevelopment for the city of Atlantic City and to directly facilitate the redevelopment of existing blighted areas and to address the pressing social and economic needs of the residents of the city of Atlantic City and the State of New Jersey by providing eligible projects in which licensees shall invest.”

The section goes on for 13 more letters, spelling out a wide array of options for the authority to do its work, whether it's creating entertainment complexes, building housing or fixing roads.

What CRDA's board may require is some more focus, so as to know where to put its attention.

Board member Howard Kyle recently summarized the frustration many have had with the authority's shotgun approach to development.

“I want to see a clear set of what our priorities are organizationally — what our vision is and what we hope to accomplish,” said Kyle, who is also chief of staff for Atlantic County. “Then we can make a plan and get it done.”

Otherwise, Kyle said, “everything is a one-off.”

“Someone comes in with an idea that sounds great, we say ‘Let’s do it.’ It’s why nothing congeals into an economic whole with some kind of power.”

That is a very cogent statement, and we’re happy to hear it expressed among CRDA’s stakeholders. The board is asking more of the right questions before spending.