

## Aviation maintenance academy could help repair Atlantic County economy

Area residents have a right to be cautious when officials start touting the latest plans for building an aviation industry around Atlantic City International Airport.

But momentum seems to be building slowly toward the point where years of efforts, with many false starts, pay off with development that could bring quality jobs to an area in need of a diversified economy no longer reliant on the shaky fortunes of the casino gambling industry.

The announcement of plans for an aviation maintenance academy at the airport is a welcome addition to that momentum.

Earlier this month, Atlantic Cape Community College and Atlantic County said they are partnering to make the airport home to an institute that will train students to repair, maintain and overhaul planes for small and major airlines. Those in the program would be Atlantic Cape students, and the Federal Aviation Administration would determine its requirements.

Don't get too excited. Officials say the academy will take a year or two to develop. Discussions are still ongoing about academy details, such as what institutions, including airlines, would participate.

But this is the type of development sorely needed in South Jersey. It fits with key recommendations for diversification made by AngelouEconomics in its economic action plan prepared for the county in the wake of casino closings in Atlantic City.

"We have the facility and the interest," County Executive Dennis Levinson says of aviation jobs and the Stockton Aviation Research and Technology Park, for which ground was broken earlier this year. "What we are lacking is a professionally trained workforce to support this field."

An academy that trains students for an industry the region covets is a logical fit.

Still, past initiatives to generate jobs and development based around the airport and FAA Technical Center have proved disappointing. Plans for what was previously called the NextGen Aviation Research and Technology Park and repeated efforts to pay airlines incentives to locate at Atlantic City International have fallen flat. And FAA efforts over the years at the technical center to develop and test the next generation of technology for air traffic control have struggled with delays and, more recently, pushes to privatize the process.

There are no assurances the latest positive developments will work out how officials hope, but the aviation academy and construction at the Stockton research park are worth support.

To increase their chances of success, there are at least two areas where efforts can be concentrated.

First, officials such as U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo need to continue to push to convince federal officials that our area — with the technical center, underutilized airport and the blossoming technology park — is the ideal location to work on the future of air traffic control, whether through government or private efforts.

Second, state officials should recognize the potential return on investment that would be created by providing financial incentives to attract aviation-related businesses to the area. Legislation to make the airport and surrounding area a Garden State Growth Zone has support from local legislators from both parties. It deserves support from the rest of the Legislature and governor so South Jersey can compete with the rest of the country.

Economic recovery in South Jersey will not come easily. But past problems should not stop us from continuing to reach for the sky for solutions.