Opinion: New A.C. partnership should not ignore benefits of state takeover

On Election Day, voters clearly said they were not happy with how things are being run in Atlantic City.

A campaign theme they embraced was that there was a need for local officials to regain local control of the city by freeing themselves of state overseers.

But the new administrations in the city and Trenton must be careful not to undo the unarguable progress made in the city’s finances under the state financial takeover. Falling back into habits and policies that left the city on the brink of bankruptcy must be avoided.

Under the takeover, which began in fall 2016, there have been dramatic reductions in the city’s tax levy and property-tax rate. And Jeffrey S. Chiesa, who leads the takeover, has reached important settlements on the city’s remaining casino tax appeals that are saving tens of millions of dollars. The appeals had been a financial drag on the city for years, pushing its bond rating to junk status.

Post-election, everyone seems to be saying the right things.

The two most important figures will be Mayor-elect Frank Gilliam and Gov.-elect Phil Murphy. The two Democrats have promised to work together to help the city prosper.

Political science professor Brigid Harrison says Murphy’s promises to increase openness in government, focus on growing and diversifying the economy, and willingness to learn about Atlantic City’s challenges all sound encouraging for the resort.

As returns came in election night, Gilliam said he is looking forward to a prosperous relationship with the new governor, who said during the campaign he opposed the state takeover of Atlantic City from a “social justice perspective.”

Even Republicans, including newly elected state Sen. Chris Brown and Atlantic County Executive Dennis Levinson, said they look forward to a bipartisan relationship with Murphy.

Hopefully, all that good will lead to positive results. It is a refreshing change from the relationship between the city and Trenton under Gov. Chris Christie.

There is a definite need to heal the wounds created by how Christie handled things. His brusque style, in which he is perceived to have imposed state control without regard for local input, home rule or the concerns of public-safety unions, contributed to the unpopularity of the move.

But it cannot be denied the takeover has helped control city spending, something local officials proved incapable of doing on their own for years.

It would be wise to keep in mind what Assemblyman Vince Mazzeo had to say about the takeover during his successful re-election campaign.

“I don’t think this is a time to start over in Atlantic County,” the Democrat told The Press of Atlantic City editorial board. “The whole area is starting to turn the corner through some of the things we’ve done.”
He said if the next governor decides to end the takeover, it needs to be done in a step-by-step process with goals and benchmarks.

That sounds like what a true partnership between the state and city should look like. It is a future that should not ignore the true progress the takeover has achieved.