

The Future of AVIATION Technology & Education



ATLANTIC COUNTY ECONOMIC ALLIANCE

Working to diversify an economy that has the highest reliance on a single industry in the United States is indeed a challenge. The primary business of Atlantic County, New Jersey, has always been gaming, casinos, poker tables and tourism. Since the seventies, taxes from this industry have supported the Atlantic City region, but today casinos are shuttered, leaving 8,000 to 12,000 people out of work and causing the highest residential foreclosure rate in the country.

Written by Marcus Rummery

Atlantic County Chief of Staff Howard Kyle is one of the major proponents of the economic alliance to bring change, to bring new industries and companies with higher paying jobs to the area. His speech is quick but determined. "We are facing significant challenges. However, we do not believe that we are unlike hundreds of other areas around the country that have had to face an economic challenge. There are numerous other ones; Pittsburgh and Cleveland are two. I could give you a list of names. In all those areas, they were able to both conquer those challenges by grouping together, looking at regional economic development and developing a strategy and a plan and working together on implementation."

Kyle has assembled a very capable team to help him especially Interim Chairman of the Atlantic County Economic Alliance Leo Shoffer, a key player in the future of Atlantic County who also sits on the board of Stockton University.

"To help us in this endeavor we contracted with AngelouEconomics from Austin, Texas. With them, we have completed an Atlantic County Economic Strategy and Action Plan. We identified five strategic industries that include tourism and gaming but call for greater economic diversity. The main thing we learned is that Atlantic County, more than any other area AngelouEconomics has studied, has too great a reliance on one industry."

The group identified twenty-seven ways to attract new business to the area.

"We are moving beyond the casino and gaming industry. What makes us special is we have other more stable assets on which we can build. For instance, we have the FAA William J. Hughes Technical Center, which is the nation's premier aviation research laboratory. We also have an international airport, which is highly underutilized in terms of its runway size and other features, and we are building on those assets." »



► The aviation sector was identified by AngelouEconomics as the business segment with the potential for direct opportunity. The county is now in the construction stage of an aviation and technology business park to take advantage of this. "We are now in the first phase of that project, and we are working aggressively to attract other companies related to aviation to this area." Phase Two will begin in mid-February as the actual construction gets underway.

"What also makes us unique is that New Jersey is one of the few areas in the country that has been designated as a test facility for unmanned aircraft or drones. All of the testing has to be reviewed and approved by the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) center here. So our relationship with the Hughes Aviation Technology Center and our designation as an unmanned aircraft test facility are the sectors we are going to focus on in terms of expanding and diversifying the economy."

Dealing with significant economic duress, as Atlantic County is, would spur many to 'batten down the hatches' and try

to save as much money as possible until the cycle revolves further and casino gaming improves. However, Atlantic County is taking the opposite approach and investing heavily in itself.

"It's been one year since we completed the economic strategy. We started construction on the Stockton University Campus in Atlantic City with a lot of different entities providing the funding. A year ago, they didn't have a location, and they didn't have funding in place, but that's all taken care of and underway as we speak."

The economic strategy's main goal was to form a one-stop corporation to assist economic development. The Atlantic County Economic Alliance was formed in February and has a base of operations in Hamilton Mall. There are three goals of the alliance: bring in business, help existing businesses stay and to promote the area.

In its first year, the group established itself and has been attempting to use the Atlantic County Improvement Authority

"We are moving beyond the casino and gaming industry."

to trace its progress. One early success story involved saving a pharmaceutical company that was about to leave the area.

"We've invested in fundraising programs; we're on our way to doing something that hasn't been done here, at least in the last thirty years. We're aggressively marketing Atlantic County as a place to do business and helping keep businesses here."

In 1693 what is known today as Atlantic County was incorporated as Egg Harbor Township in the County of Gloucester. The small community was cradled between the Atlantic Ocean to its east and South Jersey to its west, a boundary not fixed until 1761. On February 7, 1837, Atlantic County as it exists today was born.

The future belongs to those preparing for it in the present, and Atlantic County is positioning itself for new opportunities. "We do have a workforce investment board; we have training programs there. One of the industries identified in our plan is developing programs in aviation maintenance and training – for example, jet engine mechanics. We're working on getting▶



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▶ something started probably in the first half of 2017. We are looking at relocating workers from outside the area here. We are working very hard to get state economic incentives in line with our action strategy."

The county is also examining its other assets. A silver lining in the falling property values is an abundance of affordable housing, which is turning out to be an asset in luring people to the region.

It is collaborating with Atlantic Cape Community College, Stockton University, the chamber of commerce and local workforce investment board to train people for employment outside the tourist and gaming sector. "We're focused on bringing businesses with higher paid workers because that cash will get multiplied through the existing state economy and the workers within."

"If you give 5,000 people \$9 an hour jobs, that generates approximately \$94 million into the county. But just 800 research level jobs paying \$125,000 a year creates \$100 million for the economy. The difference isn't just \$6 million. People making \$9 an hour, after they pay their rent and buy groceries, they are broke. The (research workers) have the money

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to buy homes, eat out, have their hair done and subscribe to The Press."

The Stockton University Campus is also known as the Atlantic City Gateway Project and it aims to alter the substance of Atlantic City. "It's in line with our economic strategy to attract younger people to the area and help industry remain; colleges have been used in this capacity across the country. So it's a foundational issue here in Atlantic City as far as revitalization."

Putting together the team to take on such a formidable challenge has not been easy. "The Atlantic County Economic Alliance is separate from county government. We were one of the players that initiated it, and there may be an Atlantic County in the name but that's more of a locational tag. The A.C.E.A. was established as a private, non-profit 501c3 organization with a board of directors that are independent of



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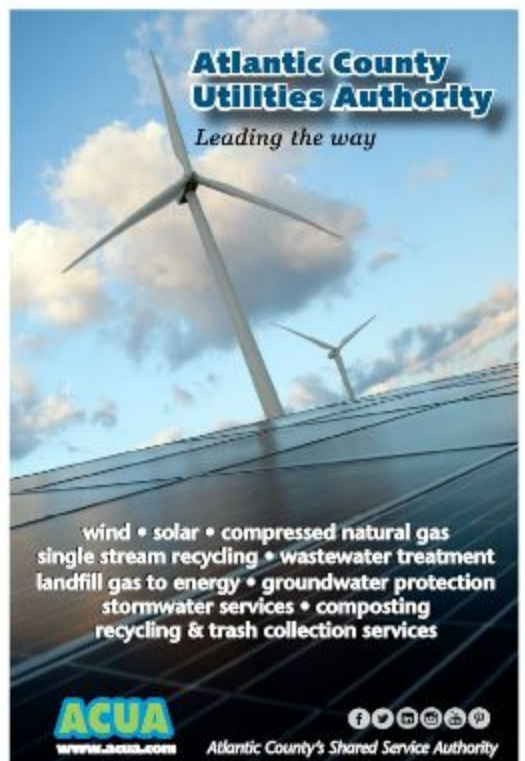
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county government. We were able to get starter funding in place and construction underway, we were able to get key members of our business community involved."

"We are taking affirmative steps in the Atlantic area to transform our economy so that in ten years you won't think about just tourism and casinos; you will think of the area as a center for aviation technology."

As the world recognizes the need for a greener and more sustainable future, Atlantic County is planning on diversify-

ing its research and development from aviation to include environmental technology. "There is an organization here that would like to tie in with the Stockton project, and it's looking at making Atlantic City a center for climate research and studies."

"The main thing is we are thinking beyond Atlantic City. We're focusing on developing our economic assets which would be Stockton and the Aviation Research Park, the Federal Aviation Administration and the airport. We're building a more broad-based and sustainable economy."



"We are working very hard to get state economic incentives in line with our action strategy."



Building the future of aviation technology and education will require a wide-ranging coalition of stakeholders and Atlantic County is working hard to bring everyone to the table. The Atlantic County Utilities Authority has pledged \$500,000 a year for at least five years, the Atlantic County Improvement Authority is kicking in \$10,000 a year along with the same yearly funding from the Stockton Aviation Research and Technology Park in addition to several other sources of financing.

"We're focused primarily on collaboration; we try to be as collective as possible. We try to be long-term in our thinking.

We try to work with everyone – all those diverse groups in the community. We try to foster and encourage private and public partnerships."

"The county is now in the construction stage of an aviation and technology business park to take advantage of this."

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