ATLANTIC CITY — As the state orchestrates an unprecedented intervention in Atlantic City's casino industry and government, Atlantic County officials have quietly been discussing their own strategies for running parts of the city.

Atlantic County Executive Dennis Levinson said recently that he met with

representatives from the city's business community to brainstorm ideas that would make county government the vehicle mostly driving Gov. Chris Christie's proposal to revitalize the resort's tourism industry. Christie, a Republican, presented a plan that called for a public-private partnership that would run a casino-tourism district.

The preliminary discussions, Levinson and the other participants said, took place about a week ago and included a proposed outline of specific boundaries for Christie's proposed tourism district, the prospect of the Atlantic County Sheriff's Office controlling law enforcement in that area, and county officials taking over some city code and planning functions.

Those suggestions are being explored independent of Christie's tourism proposal and his administration's new agreement to oversee Atlantic City's financial management, signed by state and city officials Tuesday. All are signs that political leaders on multiple government levels are looking at Atlantic City as a major economic resource that they can't let go to waste.

However, Levinson did not contact the Governor's Office about the meeting. The county executive said he wanted to stimulate interest and enthusiasm among those he invited to the meeting before making any proposals to the governor. Officials in the Governor's Office did not return several requests for comment.

Officials who attended the meeting include CRDA Executive Director Tom Carver and Chief Operating Office Susan Ney Thompson; Ken Calemmo, chairman of the Greater Atlantic City Chamber, and chamber President Joe Kelly; Atlantic County Freeholder Frank Formica; New Jersey Casino Association President Mark Juliano and Joe Fusco, also of the association.

After other participants spoke to The Press of Atlantic City about the meeting, Levinson confirmed he initiated the talks out of a need for immediate action.

“Time is of the essence. We’re in October. It was July when the governor came down and there has been no legislation since,” Levinson said. “This is probably the most efficient way to get it done. We’re already set up here. We know Atlantic City, and we know the problems that it faces.”

“The county has tried to realize what kind of a role they can plan in assisting Atlantic City and the state as it refers to this tourism zone,” Formica said. “The first question we asked is, ‘How do you make it clean and safe?’”

The sheriff’s role

The governor’s proposal, based on recommendations from an advisory commission, set the goal of making Atlantic City “clean and safe” by July 1, 2011.

Formica said the group discussed the idea of controlling the district’s policing and code enforcement through county services, along with overseeing some aspects of planning.

The group discussed possibly staffing the district with 50 patrolmen, the majority of whom would be recently laid off Atlantic City police officers. The city has cut 60 officers from the police force this year, including 40 officers less than two weeks ago.

That new platoon, Formica said, would likely be coordinated by Atlantic County Sheriff Frank Balles, who has discussed the possibility with Levinson on multiple occasions but who did not attend the recent meeting. Balles said coordinating the district’s security through the Sheriff’s Office makes the most sense, both from an efficiency standpoint and on a financial level.

“You can put two officers out there for the cost of one Atlantic City officer, or almost three for one state trooper,” he said. “Our services would supplement Atlantic City’s law enforcement. This is not to take over their entire operation throughout the city. I’m waiting to hear from the powers that be on how we proceed.”

The county has already stepped into Atlantic City's public safety sector. Atlantic County Prosecutor Ted Housel recently assigned a group of his detectives to assist resort police.

Since the layoffs, the city has seen an increase in shootings, including one each day for the first five days after the job cuts. The death of 22-year-old Konstantin Kraev, who was killed Sept. 23 after walking a friend to a party, was the 12th homicide in the city this year, equaling the total in all of 2009.

Sheriff's officers already have a presence in Atlantic City. Balles said his fugitive unit works on a daily basis in Atlantic City, with the majority of the unit's arrests coming out of Atlantic City and Pleasantville. The county also staffs officers at the city's civil courthouse.

But to undertake law enforcement in the governor's proposed district, the Sheriff's Office would have to expand significantly to manage the area's security. The county currently employs about 100 sheriff's officers. Balles, who was hesitant to speak specifically without reviewing more data, projected between 40 and 60 officers would be needed.

Those officers, Balles said, would likely be new hires that he hoped would be picked from Atlantic City's recent wave of 60 layoffs.

Atlantic City Public Safety Director Christine Petersen said she had no knowledge of the discussions and referred questions to the mayor and Deputy Police Chief Ernest Jubilee.

"If there's a proposal, I'd like to see it," said Jubilee, who was also unaware of the county talks. "But it all goes back to the mayor. That's ultimately his call. Right now, we're talking about hypotheticals. I don't like to talk about hypotheticals."

Officials in Mayor Lorenzo Langford's office did not return multiple requests over three days for an interview.

Code enforcement

Another “hypothetical” discussed during the county executive’s meeting included the takeover of code enforcement operations in the tourism district in an attempt to hold merchants to higher standards with their properties.

Unlike the Sheriff's Office, the county's inspectors currently have no hand in Atlantic City. Even if city code inspectors find themselves in a conflict of interest, officials tap the assistance of a neighboring municipality rather than county inspectors.

The county did previously manage the city's inspections of food scales, gas pumps and other devices that fall under weights and measures operations. However, those services, which cost the city nothing, were rejected when Langford took office. He opted, instead, to re-create the city's own office and hired a close friend to run the division.

“Obviously, you want to be aware of what’s being discussed,” Anthony Cox, director of the city’s Licensing and Inspections Department, said of the county discussions. “There may be some pros to it and there may be some cons. But if you’re going to talk about helping, the first thing you normally do is ask.”

Cox said Formica informally mentioned the possibility of assisting the city’s code enforcement months ago, but that discussions never went beyond one brief phone call.

District boundaries

According to the discussions so far, Balles’ force would patrol the Boardwalk and Pacific Avenue between Albany and Maine avenues.

That proposed district would be a redefined version of the governor's vision, which was believed to include the areas around the casinos disconnected from the Boardwalk, such as Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa and Trump Marina Hotel Casino.

Levinson said the limitations are necessary to ensure focus, which will lead to greater success and less money needed for investment.

"The Boardwalk is smack-dab in the middle of an inner city with all the problems that come with it," Levinson said.

Formica said the county modeled its idea for the tourism district after the original zone in which the Atlantic City Special Improvement District operates.

"I think that most agree that you cannot have a noncontiguous zone," Formica said.

The focus on the Boardwalk and the city's beaches was a major part of Christie's proposal, and its view of importance is also shared by some residents of Atlantic City.

"The Boardwalk should be No. 1," city resident William Cheatham told City Council this week. "There ain't no way in the world that you guys can sit up there and be proud of that Boardwalk. No way! Whatever it takes to rebuild it — beg, borrow, steal — whatever it takes."

While Cheatham's options to fund the Boardwalk's revitalization might not be necessary, Formica said the group discussed some ways to fund the district, including minimizing casino regulations to build a cash fund for improvements in the district.

Over-stepping?

Changing those regulations, however, would likely require state legislation. The participation of state lawmakers drafting and guiding those changes is crucial. But Levinson did not include any of the local legislative delegation in his conversations, which some think could prove costly in the long run.

Brigid Harrison, a professor of political science at Montclair State University and an Absecon resident, said the county executive could see his involvement hampered depending on whether his meetings are perceived as “exploratory and preliminary” or whether those not involved simply took it as a slight.

“I think that it is silly and naive of the executive to argue that politics would not be part of this very political process,” said. “That being said, there’s probably room for less-than-formal exploratory meetings.”

Levinson said the officials’ initial exclusion was by design.

“Their input is important,” Levinson said, generally referring to state politicians. “But when I saw the problems with these summits and the arguments of North Jersey against South Jersey, it became clear to me that this needed to start as apolitical.”

However, Formica’s presence hurts that argument. The freeholder acknowledged he was not initially invited to the meeting, but was at the county building when the meeting occurred and was permitted to join. Levinson, who is also an elected official, acknowledged that Formica’s presence at the meeting was a mistake, simply because politicians were supposed to be initially kept out.

State legislators, who learned of the meeting after The Press began asking questions about it, differed on whether the county should have a role in the governor’s plan — opinions that mostly depended on political party.

Republican Assemblymen Vince Polistina and John Amodeo, both R-Atlantic, said the county’s “well-run” government would likely help Christie’s efforts.

Polistina, who said he has been working with the Governor's Office for the last two months on related legislation, said there could be county involvement, but he was not sure to what extent.

"I think it's yet to be determined," he said. "At the end of the day, the governor recognizes that we are all going to need to work together. Certainly the county has some resources that could help."

State Sen. Jim Whelan, D-Atlantic, also said he had no knowledge of the discussions, but said he was never under the impression that the county would have much involvement with the governor's proposal.

"The concept the governor spoke of was a partnership between the city and the state," he said. "Bringing the county in, that's another moving part."

Contact Michael Clark:

609-272-7204

Michael.Clark@pressofac.com

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