

Can a revived casino district save Atlantic City? - USA Today

Written by Administrator

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Now it's casino executives and lobbyists heading to Trenton seeking their own jackpot.

Lawmakers in the state capital are working

on bills to deregulate the casinos, establish an elite police force to patrol the boardwalk, and create a fund where millions of dollars will be spent to market and remake Atlantic City's image.

The plan is to establish an Atlantic City tourism district. Not quite a [New Jersey](#) version of Disney (no amusement park is planned), but casino and state officials say they want to create a safer, cleaner and more fun destination for gamblers and families alike.

Regional infrastructure improvements on the drawing board for Atlantic City include increasing airport, rail and ferry options.

A master plan for the district is being drafted with a focus on "enticing new entrants to build both gaming and non-gaming attractions that will increase demand in the city," according to the governor's office. One zone, for instance, would feature water sports and extreme sports activities.

The plan is due on Gov. Chris Christie's desk by July 1.

Officials are counting on paying for the activity with \$20 million annually expected to be realized from regulatory cost-cutting, plus retention of the \$30 million yearly subsidy formerly paid by the casinos to the horse racing industry.

"A lot of that money will be earmarked into an image campaign where we talk about the great things Atlantic City has and try to overcome the perception that people might have of the city," said Mark Juliano, a member of the Atlantic City Convention and Visitors Authority and former CEO of Trump Entertainment.

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After the 2009 New Jersey gubernatorial election, Juliano served on Christie's transition team. He is credited with convincing the [Republican](#) governor and administration policy adviser Jon Hanson to place big bets on Atlantic City.

Christie said he is anxious to see action on the bills that he has promised to sign into law.

"We need to deal with the Atlantic City reform project. We stepped in to create a plan," Christie said. "That has led the industry to come in to be a partner with the state in the marketing of the city. That can make Atlantic City once again an economic engine for the state."

The Atlantic City casinos have been savaged by slot and casino start-ups in neighboring states. The gaming halls now handle about \$3.9 billion annually in bets, down from a high of \$5.3 billion.

Employment at the casinos, once at a high of 50,000, has dropped at a similar pace. Layoffs in the past year have helped cut the workforce to 35,000, a reduction of 1,600 employees for that period.

"What has drastically changed Atlantic City is the competition," Juliano said. "We don't have a monopoly anymore so you have to give people a multitude of reasons to come. The competition in other states is essentially slot machines at racetracks and some free-standing casinos. None of that has what we have here, the infrastructure and big hotels with 500, 1,000 and 2,000 rooms. The convenience gambler, we can't sway. But there are enough people we can bring to Atlantic City for two or three days not just to gamble but for conventions and vacations with a beach."

The main item on the casino industry's shopping list: cops. Lots of them.

Juliano said tourists need to think of Atlantic City as a safe destination.

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"Perception can become reality. If people don't think Atlantic City is safe, that has to be addressed," he said.

[Democratic](#) State Sen. Jeff Van Drew proposes deploying as many 100 police officers in a special tourism district police unit. His to create a joint law enforcement boardwalk task force led by the State Police superintendent has been merged with a similar measure from Senate President Steven Sweeney. Action by a committee is expected on Monday.

"The improved presence of police will be a big part of a new look and feel for the boardwalk," Juliano said. "I think you'll also have more of an emphasis on keeping the boardwalk clean. Simple things like keeping the trash receptacles clean."

The Christie administration also wants the state to loosen regulations on the Atlantic City casinos, cutting spending by more than \$15 million annually, with the money going into the tourism district fund. This year's combined budget of the state Casino Control Commission and Division of Gaming Enforcement is \$66 million. The money comes from assessments paid by the casinos and from licensing fees. In comparison, Nevada has a \$44 million regulation budget.

The Casino Control Commission has a small army of investigators — currently there are 151 people with that responsibility out of a commission staff of 270.

The commission has made cutbacks on its own, eliminating some 50 jobs and reducing its annual budget by about \$5 million over the last several years.

Linda Kassekert, chairwoman of the commission, said, "I look forward to helping in the process to consider any future changes."

Van Drew said 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week monitoring and high regulation of the casinos was necessary in the early days of Atlantic City gaming. He said changes are needed, "but we have to be careful and not go too far."

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The planned remaking of Atlantic City will be a gradual endeavor, Juliano said.

"I don't think it will look too much different in a year. I don't think you'll see a lot right away because we'll be in the process of developing plans and prioritizing what the needs for the district will be," Juliano said. "But changes will be coming. It's an exciting time."

Bob Jordan writes for the Gannett Trenton (N.J.) Bureau.

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