

Legislature passes tax break for aviation district at Atlantic City Airport

JOHN DeROSIER Staff Writer

A bill designating the area around Atlantic City International Airport as a Garden State Growth Zone passed the state Assembly on Tuesday and now heads to Gov. Chris Christie's desk for final approval.

The bill, originally introduced by Assemblyman Vince Mazzeo and the late state Sen. Jim Whelan, both D-Atlantic, creates tax incentives for businesses within the "aviation district," or one mile surrounding the airport, which is a key element in Atlantic County's pursuit of creating an aviation industry and diversifying its economy away from the gaming market.

Proponents say it will help the county secure tenants for the first building of the Stockton Aviation Research and Technology Park.

"This package is going to help put us on the map," said Lauren Moore, executive director of the Atlantic County Economic Alliance. "We're working with several candidates (to fill the building) and this will allow us to put a very compelling incentive offer on the table."

The county officially broke ground on the park in the spring following nearly a decade of legal entanglements and delays. The first building was set to be open by the end of 2018, but Moore said the construction is ahead of schedule and could be done by the end of September.

He also said the tax incentives will help in establishing an aviation academy at the airport that will train and certify workers to fix planes and work in the aviation industry.

"We're going to continue our work with our partners at the Greater Atlantic City Chamber of Commerce, the Atlantic County Improvement Authority and the tech park to make sure the governor knows how important this bill is," he said. "We're creating an aviation industry, so this will be good for all of South Jersey and New Jersey as a whole."

Passing the bill was a hot topic issue during the 2017 campaign in the 2nd Legislative District. Outgoing state Sen. Colin Bell, D-Atlantic, sponsored the legislation after Whelan's death, and it received bipartisan support after Assemblyman Chris Brown, R-Atlantic, joined Mazzeo as a co-sponsor in the Assembly.

State Sen. Jeff Van Drew, D-Cape May, Cumberland, Atlantic, also sponsored the bill. It passed the state Senate in December.

"Creating a growth zone around the airport, to encompass the Stockton Aviation Research Park, has the potential to be a real driver in bringing new industry and new good-paying jobs to our area," Mazzeo said. "This would benefit the city, the county, lessen our reliance on gaming as our main economic driver and position Atlantic City as a prominent player in the aviation industry."

Under the legislation, the airport will join Atlantic City, Camden, Passaic, Paterson and Trenton as Garden State Growth Zones.

Brown said he believes the passage of the bill will lead to the creation of 2,500 jobs at the tech park.

“At a time when the unemployment and foreclosure rates are unacceptably high, we are one step closer to diversifying our economy by attracting good-paying jobs that will go a long way to help Atlantic County’s middle-class families to afford their homes, so they can raise their children and be able to retire some day,” Brown said.