

NASA touches down in Atlantic County, collaborates with FAA

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EGG HARBOR TOWNSHIP — NASA made one giant leap into South Jersey by teaming up with the Federal Aviation Administration William J. Hughes Technical Center to collaborate on advancing drone technology, electric vertical takeoff and landing aircraft operating in low-altitude airspace in urban environments.

Under a multiyear agreement, NASA will use work space at the FAA's National Aviation Research and Technology Park for advanced air mobility projects. Seven FAA employees will work alongside the space agency.

NASA's vision for AAM is to "help emerging aviation markets to safely develop an air transportation system that moves people and cargo between places previously not served or underserved by aviation ... using revolutionary new aircraft that are only just now becoming possible," according to its website.

As research in the AAM market continues, NASA could expand its footprint in South Jersey with further AAM research, development, testing and evaluation by a larger workforce.

"Once AAM is unlocked, there will be a period of rapid transformation in the aviation industry," said Ian Levitt, principal engineer for NASA's urban air mobility subproject, Air Traffic Management — Exploration, or ATM-X.

Levitt, a former FAA employee, is now leading the NASA research at the NARTP.

"NASA's presence here and its partnership with the Tech Center, NARTP and the aviation industry helps to fill a known challenge with the transfer of technology from NASA to the FAA," he said.

The goal of the project is to transform the nation's air traffic management system to accommodate the growing demand of new aircraft that enter the airspace.

In 2019, FAA traffic control specialist John Bradley developed a virtual scenario for air taxis flying between Atlantic City International Airport and various sites in Atlantic City, dubbing it the "Jitney Route," paying homage to the city's historic public transportation vehicles. Later that year, a team from the Tech Center mentioned the "Jitney Route" during a visit to NASA's Langley Research Center in Hampton, Virginia. The NASA team had been seeking a model to help drive its AAM research and found that the "Jitney Route" was perfect for the project.

"NASA's circuitous arrival at the NARTP highlights the value of establishing work relationships between agencies," said Jon Schleifer, manager of the Research and Development Management Division at the Tech Center.

The collaboration delivers advances to AAM and further increases the local demand for science, technology, engineering and mathematics jobs.

“My hope is that this partnership helps bridge a gap that has long existed between NASA research and FAA implementation,” Levitt said.