

Stockton, NJEDA sign memorandum of understanding for Esports Innovation Center

Ahmad Austin

ATLANTIC CITY — Stockton University on Tuesday continued to embrace the future with what could be a game-changer for the resort and the region.

University President Harvey Kesselman, along with New Jersey Economic Development Authority Chief Economic Officer Brian Sabina, signed a memorandum of understanding between the two parties for the opening of the Esports Innovation Center.

Located on the university's city campus, the Innovation Center will be used to support research and development, technology innovation and workforce development within the rapidly-growing esports industry.

The NJEDA is providing \$200,000 for its operation.

Kesselman said discussions for the center began years ago when the university realized there was a future in the industry.

"We formed a team," he said of the Stockton Esports program. "We saw how quickly the team became extremely competitive, extremely popular. We knew that the industry was growing leaps and bounds.

"You're talking about a city that has large tourism and gaming popularity, not only in the United States but the world. Atlantic City's world-known. Why not have something innovative with esports where we can bring in new industries?"

Officials from the university and NJEDA joined members of the esports community in the Alton Student Lounge for the signing. Remarks were given by Kesselman, Sabina and Lt. Gov. Sheila Oliver.

Oliver said that initiatives like the Innovation Center are essential to diversifying the city's economy.

"If this pandemic has taught us anything in Atlantic County and in the region, it's that we must offer career choices and career opportunities for more diverse populations of people in the region," Oliver said. "We love the fact that we have the hospitality industry firmly anchored here, but we know we have to go out in different ways."

News of the partnership between Stockton and the NJEDA was announced in May. With it, the Innovation Center will function independently as a 501(c)(3) organization and have its own board consisting of representatives of the university and industry stakeholders. The workforce development aspect of the center will help to train employees to operate esports events held in the area.

According to Sabina, the esports industry was recently valued at \$250 million in North America. In three years, its global value is projected to exceed \$9 billion.

"This is a tidal wave opportunity," he said, "and to make an investment as the state of New Jersey, to make an investment with a phenomenal partner like Stockton University, is exactly what we should be doing."

With the MOU signed, the university's next steps include appointing an executive director and acquiring the 501(c)(3) designation, said Stockton Chief Information Officer Scott Huston. That is expected to be completed later this summer or early fall.

It will also work to involve entities within the private sector to figure out how they can get involved, which has the potential to attractive companies like Amazon and Google.

"(With) esports in general, you can't get more excited," Huston said. "It's everywhere. It's really making a lot of moves. Everything's moving in that direction, so it's super exciting. And then to have the NJEDA come together with us to kind of kick off this Innovation Center, we think it has a lot of potential (to create) jobs in Atlantic City and jobs in the whole state."

The center will also bring about new academic programming. Kesselman likened it to the university becoming the first in the state to offer a minor in cannabis studies in 2019.

"At first, they laughed," Kesselman said. "Well, there's the business end of it; there's the chemical end of it, so you can come at it from a natural sciences and mathematics point of view. You can come at it from a business point of view; you can come at it from a social justice point of view."

"All of that ties into what we do. Look at the internship possibilities that these kinds of centers and these kinds of initiatives can provide students."