

Office construction, hotel at ACRC is next logical step in NextGen evolution, economic development exec says

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By SARAH WATSON, Staff Writer



Redevelopment plans involving the Atlantic City Race Course hinge on a niche technological market involving unmanned aircraft, similar to those flying military missions in Afghanistan, South Jersey Economic Development District executive director Gordon Dahl said Tuesday.

The conceptual plans, which involve building six office buildings and a 20-story hotel on property currently owned by the race course and sandwiched between the actual track and the Hamilton Mall, were made public Monday during a Hamilton Township committee meeting.

The plans correlate with the first development phase of the NextGen Aviation and Technology Research Park, which is slated for construction at the Federal Aviation Administration Tech Center in Egg Harbor Township. The NextGen buildings will contain research and development involving an overhaul of the nation's air traffic control system.

The South Jersey Economic Development District paid for the conceptual plan in Egg Harbor Township and approached race course officials with the preliminary proposal several months ago, Dahl said. The roughly \$20,000 investment in consultants and planners is a tiny drop in the bucket compared to the potential \$300 million to \$400 million overall price tag for the hotel, office park and race course redevelopment, which will be footed by private developers that are not yet determined, Dahl said.

Building offices specifically for aviation technology jobs related, but not involved, to the research at NextGen is "the next logical step," Dahl said. "We've identified a lot of new market opportunities for aviation, including the expansion of NextGen technology, unmanned aircraft systems and a whole host of global operations in developing airport technology."

And it's those opportunities that will create tenants for the proposed office park, tentatively called the International Aviation Center for Excellence. In addition to the office buildings and hotel, the redevelopment plans call for dozens of residential units and adding community park space to the race track while renovating the race track's iconic clubhouse and viewing stands.

The niche unmanned aircraft technological market could mean 23,000 jobs nationwide specifically geared toward that sector over the next 10 years, Dahl said. "We want a big chunk of that."

Meanwhile, the announcement has many in the Atlantic County and Hamilton Township economic growth and business community buzzing about the

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likelihood that the region's economic future will shift more from tourism and casinos to encapsulate a significant aviation technology sector.

Atlantic County executive Dennis Levinson said the announcement was "very very positive."

"We believe that (NextGen and aviation technology) is the future for Atlantic County and South Jersey and we also believe that it is going to be symbiotic, the spin-offs from the park, we believe, will be considerable, so this is just one example of people being excited and interested and coming to Atlantic County."

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