

PREFACE: ATLANTIC CITY IN TRANSITION

*by Martin B. Danziger**

Atlantic City's economy has been dependent on tourism for generations. Tourism has been the controlling factor in the development of the city. From the Civil War until approximately the 1950s, Atlantic City was a leading eastern shore resort. During the twenty-five years thereafter, inadequate expenditures for capital improvements contributed to the city's physical and economic decline. Population decreased, employment opportunities disappeared, and physical facilities deteriorated.

Atlantic City can be redeveloped into a major, first-class, multi-faceted resort and entertainment center. The proximity of the beach, the boardwalk, Convention Hall, the dining opportunities, as well as the recreational alternatives such as sports and gaming to one-fourth of the population of the United States argues for the ultimate success of the urban redevelopment effort.

There are, however, at least six high priority programs which must move forward expeditiously if Atlantic City is to attract investment capital. Plans must be effectuated, followed by real progress, in the areas of (1) public transportation, (2) renovation of Convention Hall, (3) solid waste disposal and water quality, (4) expanded and upgraded housing stock, (5) city-wide clean-up campaigns, and (6) improved cooperation between government and commercial interest at the local and state levels.

Since the passage of the gambling referendum in New Jersey, progress in each of the enumerated areas has been minimal. This has never been more readily apparent than with respect to the first area of concern enumerated above. Atlantic City lacks a well-conceived and coordinated transportation system into and out of the city.

Secondly, Convention Hall continues to suffer from indecision and unresolved questions. An insufficient number of first-class hotel rooms renders reconstruction unfeasible. Conversely, those individuals responsible for bringing about the Hall's needed reconstruction and renovation, thereby encouraging the increase of first-class hotel rooms, remain unidentified. Unless the hopes and promises of a reconstructed and renovated Hall are delivered in the reasonable future, this project will falter due to the public's and investment community's loss of faith in Atlantic City's business and governmental leadership.

Thirdly, the debate over additional facilities or the increased capacity to deal with solid waste disposal and water quality continues. Most knowl-

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edgeable observers are uncertain whether the city can meet its responsibilities in these areas as the population increases and development continues.

Similarly, discussions concerning the adequacy and availability of the current housing stock have been characterized by charges and countercharges. The effects of high interest rates have slowed projected construction. The situation is aggravated by the deterioration of housing conditions in many sections of the city. Land speculation, arson, demolition, and disrespect for property have contributed to the creation of slums.

The fifth category, the clean-up campaign of existing hotel/motel facilities, is a necessity in order for the city to meet the increased demand for renovated and improved rooms. Accordingly, the clean-up campaign currently supported by community leaders is an exciting prospect for the future and serves as an excellent example of self-help and community action. However, the early years of any developmental effort of the dimension needed in Atlantic City results in a temporarily depressed condition. Destruction and decay precede effective reconstruction. Unfortunately, a city's image is also established during these early years of reformation. Planning, thoughtful innovation, and effective, aggressive community involvement must coexist with the developmental effort in order to successfully offset the public's identification of Atlantic City with unsightly, albeit necessary, reconstruction. Have community groups, business interests, and government officials mobilized to minimize the potential for failure and maximize the chance for success? My analyses of available data and periodic tours of the city lead me to believe that still more can be accomplished.

The sixth area, the need for improved local and state government cooperation with the commercial or private sector, is fraught with unanswered questions. Is there an actual or perceived vacuum in the leadership of Atlantic City? Have some of the successes of Atlantic City been diminished by disputes among the various levels of government, community, and commercial interests? Have these efforts been frustrated by political infighting and inefficiency? Has a course of action been selected and supported by an appropriate leadership? Battles are still being fought over the need for a regional coordinating mechanism, riparian rights, expedited Coastal Area Facilities Review Act approvals, and tax incentives.

Atlantic City is an economy in transition. The old is being torn down to make way for the new. Land values have been inflated, forcing many businesses and residents to relocate. The high concentration of capital in the area of the boardwalk is expected to have a ripple effect on the Atlantic City community. The community should be poised to respond to these developments. Atlantic City needs the infrastructure to accommodate expansion if success is to be forthcoming. The number of hotel rooms and the amount of convention space, housing, and public transportation

need to be increased. An identifiable and accountable leadership is necessary. Most importantly, weakness in local and state government, as well as in the city's commercial leadership, must be overcome. These elements are essential to the city's growth.

The natural wonders of Atlantic City are spectacular. The ocean, beach, and air are beautiful. The city is a walking, biking, jogging city. This is obvious if you observe the residents and visitors parading the length of the boardwalk.

Atlantic City can experience the desired rebirth. It has the qualities and the inherent beauty necessary to do so. The city has the motivation. But some key participants in the city's progress have adopted a wait-and-see attitude. Now, six years after the passage of the gaming referendum, many are still waiting. The Atlantic City dream will not be fulfilled without leadership, commitment, compromise, investment, a strong desire to succeed, and a lot of hard work. If we wait and see, we will just wait and never see.