

Atlantic City officials reject word 'takeover,' any comparison of city with Camden

By JULIET FLETCHER, Statehouse Bureau | Posted:
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As Gov. Chris Christie's aggressive plan for state involvement in Atlantic City leaked out Tuesday, observers started to use a dreaded, polarizing term: "state takeover."

For southern New Jersey residents, it was all-too-easy to think of Camden. The details of the state involvement in Atlantic City are still being worked out, but news of state control over a large - and as yet undefined - territory in the city designated as a tourism district drew parallels with the state's decision in 2002 to take over key functions in the city of Camden.

Christie has called himself "reluctant" to see a state takeover of anything. Mayor Lorenzo Langford said he views Christie's plan as a partnership, not a "takeover." Two days after the governor's announcement about Atlantic City, casino representatives have moved to stop use of the "takeover" term.

But judging by readers' comments on news websites, the public continues to associate Christie's plan with Camden; and city stakeholders are wondering how different state control of Atlantic City will turn out.

Christie, standing outside Boardwalk Hall on We

Christie, who said on the campaign trail in 2009 that Camden should return to home rule, said his hopes for Atlantic City are different because its problems are different. But the Camden plan also relied on public-private partnerships to develop infrastructure and tourism.

"What you have in Camden is a dearth of investment for decades and decades and decades, and decay that's come along with it," he said Wednesday.

"In Atlantic City, you have a recent and acute crisis that needs to be dealt with. You don't have a lack of investment historically in Atlantic City," he went on. "What you have is an acute crisis that was brought on, in my view, by the state's collective reluctance to modernize and change with changing competitive circumstances that were happening around us. Now we need to do it."

He concluded: "They're two totally different situations."

Representatives of Camden's Mayor Dana Redd could not be reached Friday for comment.

Christie pointed to three ways the cities' plans differ: The role of the city government under state control, the funding available and the way the private-public partnerships would fulfill a mission.

In Camden, the mayor had no outright executive power. Meanwhile, \$175 million state funding went to the creation of new educational and tourism centers, with the expectation of reducing blight, improving safety and creating jobs.

But recent statistics on Camden's seven-year takeover, which ended last January when Jon S. Corzine left office, found that few jobs were created, violence had not shrunk and educational test scores had not significantly improved.

In Atlantic City, where crime and blight rates have never matched Camden's, the state-controlled district would not have a quasi-CEO but a governing commission that would include a representative from the city government. Langford and City Council would maintain control over areas outside the state's tourism district.

And the private-public partnership - led mostly but not exclusively by representatives from casinos - would work not only to complete private investors' projects but to improve surrounding areas, encourage and fund other kinds of entertainment, and help pay for city services.

"These are the kinds of partnerships that would have been nice to see naturally," says Sharon Schulman, director of the Hughes Center for Public Policy at Richard Stockton College in Galloway Township. "They didn't appear naturally, though. So with this plan, Christie is forcing those appropriate relationships."

Atlantic City is not alone in having the state look over its shoulder. The state's takeover of Camden has been called the largest municipal takeover in U.S. history - based on the breadth of

powers ceded by elected leaders and the number of years it lasted - but there are other, smaller examples.

In 1989 New Jersey became the first state to take over a school district when it moved into the Jersey City schools. Paterson followed in 1991 and Newark in 1995. The takeovers were meant to be temporary, but all three remain under state control.

Since then, seven districts including Atlantic City, were put under so-called state monitoring, giving them more intensive state oversight. In 2007, Pleasantville became one of eight districts to which state fiscal monitors were assigned. The district still has a state monitor four days a week.

In Atlantic City, the key is to create an arrangement that feels organic, said Bob McDevitt, president of Local 54 of UNITE-HERE, the city's largest casino workers union.

"This will be unlike Camden, where city residents didn't support their takeover," he said. "Here, I'm confident city residents and workers will welcome what the governor is doing. They recognize this city has not yet lost its core industry, and they don't want to see it go."

All the same, McDevitt hears residents wondering about the beefed-up state presence, especially regarding public safety officers on the street.

"I've had people ask me, 'Is this going to be a police state?' And I say, when you walk through the great cities of this country, seeing police on the streets isn't a bad thing. Tourists aren't afraid of police. Residents aren't. Only criminals are."

In fact, McDevitt said, most Atlantic City residents will welcome the services and the higher security. They just may not like the word "takeover."

Mark Juliano, CEO of Trump Entertainment and president of the Casino Association of New Jersey that represents the city's casino businesses, also wishes people would call the plan something else.

"Takeover' is not a good word," he said Friday. "It's an easy word to use, but it's too simplistic. This is not a takeover. It has truly got to be a cooperative effort between the industry, the state and

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