

Atlantic City one year later / Making progress

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A year ago today, Gov. Chris Christie stood on the Atlantic City Boardwalk and announced his plan to remake the resort - and to put the state in charge of a new Tourism District.

So how's it going?

Remarkably well, especially considering that the new law creating the Tourism District and putting the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority in charge of it was not approved by the Legislature and signed by the governor until Feb. 1.

What has been notable about the process so far is that for the first time in ... well, maybe forever ... all segments of the city seem to be pulling together in the same direction.

Yes, there is some grumbling about the extent of the state's new power in Atlantic City. Mayor Lorenzo Langford is not happy. But a series of community meetings held by CRDA interim Executive Director Susan Ney Thompson deftly defused most community concerns. The process of having State Police Lt. Col. Tom Gilbert oversee police operations in the Tourism District seems to be going smoothly (at least if there is tension between State Police and Atlantic City police, it has not erupted publicly). City government deserves praise for being more aggressive about getting derelict properties cleaned up or demolished.

And, whether directly attributable to the establishment of the new Tourism District or not (it sure hasn't hurt), there has been new investment in the city's casino hotels.

Caesars Entertainment opened five new restaurants. Landry's Inc. took over the former Trump Marina Hotel Casino and is turning it into a Golden Nugget. There are new owners and a new energy at Resorts Casino Hotel. And, thanks to a state tax rebate over the next 30 years, Revel Entertainment obtained financing and restarted construction.

Three companies have expressed interest in building one of the two smaller 200-room casino hotels allowed under a law signed in January. The Boardwalk seems noticeably cleaner and is showing off new planters and new signs.

Also, Langford's Strategic Planning Committee, created nine months before Christie announced his plans, has been hard at work bringing new entertainment options to the city, including the successful Dave Matthews Band Caravan music festival.

Much remains to be done, of course. The Atlantic City Alliance, a group of casino executives who will be in charge of developing - and funding - a new marketing strategy for the resort is not quite up and running yet. A national search for a new CRDA executive director continues. (Note to the

governor: Admit that the national search was unnecessary and give the job to Susan Ney Thompson. She's doing the job as well as, if not better than, anyone from outside the region will do it, and keeping her in the post will maintain the momentum that has already been achieved.)

We were wary of the governor's plan. It was big, bold and all-inclusive. It can't work, we said to ourselves. Atlantic City is often where grand dreams die. But it *is* working.

Granted, not without some pain. The risky deregulation of the casino industry led to hundreds of layoffs at casinos and the Casino Control Commission.

But in the year since Christie stood on the Boardwalk and the six months since the Tourism District legislation was signed, much progress toward revitalizing the city and its economy has been made - and with far less acrimony than we would have thought possible.