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Ready For Its Economic Close-Up

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By Noelle Reeve

Within the next decade or so, Southeastern New Jersey could fulfill its promise and become a driving economic force for the Garden State.

The fundamentals look good. Predictions are that the populations of Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland and Ocean Counties will increase by more than 35 percent. Job-growth projections are also strong; casinos are expanding, and the area's miles of fine coastline give it one of the highest-yielding fishing industries on the East Coast.

Later this year, the first direct rail service from New York to Atlantic City is to begin. The new line is expected to draw millions more visitors a year.

At the same time, Atlantic City International Airport - a backup landing site for NASA space shuttles - is aggressively courting major carriers because the casino construction boom is helping it overcome one of its longest-standing obstacles: a lack of hotel rooms for overnight guests.

Other economic assets of the region include the nation's first military "megabase," which occupies 60 square miles and is home to Lakehurst Naval Air Engineering Station, Fort Dix, and McGuire Air Force Base; New Jersey's first commercial wind farm, in Atlantic City; and the "Atlantic City Expressway Research Triangle," which includes Rowan University, Richard Stockton College, and high-tech labs such as the William J. Hughes Technical Center, an aviation research, development and testing facility.

Another plus - though one less publicized - is an awareness on the part of key decision-makers of the importance of good land-use planning in supporting the economic development and environmental protection of this region, which is critically important to future prosperity in the Garden State.

In Atlantic City, the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority is developing a master transportation plan to connect the airport to the city and train service to the casinos. Much effort is also being put into developing a well-thought-out network of roads and transit services to give access to all points of Atlantic City.

Another major regional planning success is the Pinelands, whose 1.1 million acres - the largest tract of open space on the mid-Atlantic coast - were protected in 1979

through a federal-state partnership and a restrictive regional growth management plan.

Such restrictions are often viewed as an impediment to growth. Yet key economic indicators show Pinelands communities routinely outpacing those outside the region, according to data collected by the New Jersey Pinelands Commission. Property taxes are lower, houses sell at higher prices, and there is lower unemployment in the Pinelands' 47 communities compared with the 155 municipalities outside the area.

More regional land-use planning could help Southeastern New Jersey avoid the sprawl, congestion, concentrated poverty and environmental degradation of other parts of the state.

The housing market is of particular concern. According to the development authority, only a third of casino workers live in Atlantic City. With jobs expected to grow by 40,000 a year, more workers would commute into Atlantic City from less-expensive suburbs, possibly causing traffic and air pollution to worsen. Clearly, increased greenhouse gas emissions are unacceptable in a state with 127 miles of shoreline, all of which remains extremely vulnerable to rising sea levels.

Other concerns have to do with infrastructure, including water and energy. But again, industry officials are decidedly forward-looking. Consider the Atlantic County Utilities Authority: it is powered by a landfill gas-to-energy plant; boasts the largest biodiesel fleet in New Jersey; has one of the state's largest solar installations; and is pursuing two wastewater reuse pilot projects. Also, Atlantic City Electric Co. is investing in innovative technologies - such as "smart meters" - to help customers reduce their energy use and protect the environment.

If officials in Southeastern New Jersey continue to think strategically and act regionally, the region may realize the too-often-deferred dream for smart growth, at least in one important part of the Garden State.

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