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Here's Hoping the Aviation Park Takes Off

The tourism industry that dominates southern New Jersey's economy makes it rich with entry-level jobs.

Most positions at casino hotels, shops catering to tourists, shore motels, food establishments and such don't require many skills beyond a good work ethic and a desire to learn and improve.

Such positions don't pay a lot - usually much less than the state's median household income of \$67,142. That's the reality for most unskilled workers and people starting out.

Conversely, we have relatively few high-paying, skilled jobs, which economists have long considered the most significant weakness in the regional economy.

The cure is to identify the region's strengths and then use them to develop or lure businesses with skilled jobs.

The aviation research that has long been conducted at and around the William Hughes Technical Center in Egg Harbor Township is one such strength.

And the public/private effort to develop a \$400 million aviation business park associated with the center is perhaps our best shot at diversifying the region's economy and increasing the number of well-paying jobs.

I've heard some skepticism about the NextGen Aviation and Research Technology Park planned next to the tech center, which is natural. We've all heard of too many private-public partnerships in the past that didn't amount to much.

But this one really is different, and not just because all the pertinent players seem to understand what's at stake this time and are committed to making it happen.

The aviation park is a great opportunity, and a report this week on corporate site selection confirms it.

The Boyd Co., a Princeton consultancy that researches potential locations for corporations (including, pertinently, jet engine maker Pratt & Whitney, and landing-gear systems maker Messier-Dowty), presented its Aerospace Industry Bizcosts Report at a conference at Seaview Resort in Galloway Township.

Boyd Co. worked up the costs in 63 locations around the United States for a 150,000-square-foot aerospace research and production facility employing 250 workers.

Annual costs ranged from a high of \$29.2 million in the San Jose-Sunnyvale, Calif.-area to a low of \$20.7 million in the Starkville, Miss., region.

Significantly, the site of the planned aviation park came in with the third-lowest overall annual operating cost, \$23.4 million.

More importantly, it is the lowest-cost site by far in the core of the Northeast.

John Boyd Jr., vice president of the consultancy founded by his father, said the location near the tech center has advantages beyond the numbers, such as access to the District of Columbia and the defense-industry complex.

Other areas with similar access - northern Virginia and southern Maryland, and suburban Seattle - have much higher costs of living than in the Galloway Township-Mays Landing area, he said.

"The other part of it is, there is already a critical mass of defense- and aerospace-related engineers in New Jersey," Boyd said, thanks to aviation work at the Hughes Tech Center, McGuire Air Force Base and the Naval Air Station at Lakehurst.

"The idea of a company such as Boeing, for example, moving here and attracting workers is very doable, and that's a big positive," he said.

And with the aviation park enjoying strong support from the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority, "we project that these things will happen," Boyd said.

But wait a minute. This is New Jersey, with its high corporate taxes, budget deficits and difficult regulatory climate.

"As dreadful as New Jersey is, there are some very attractive incentive packages which could help underwrite the cost of moving to the new business park," he said.

Boyd cited the example of Boeing's move of its headquarters from Seattle to Chicago, choosing Illinois, a state not known for business friendliness either. Boeing got big incentives, and "that's the type of thing New Jersey can do when a very lucrative project is on the horizon."

I hope it's on our horizon and in our future.

As much as I love the tourism industry - so much fun, so many jobs, such quality of life - I'd be more confident about the advance of civilization in southern New Jersey if our economy had a stronger skilled-work component.

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