

# Ed JohnsonAP

## Economic Roulette

*By Ed Johnson, Mayor Emeritus, Asbury Park  
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Sometimes New Jersey politics is a creation all its own. Where else in the world can you solve a problem by bandaging one foot and then purposely shooting yourself in the other? That basically describes our dilemma over Atlantic City.

On one hand State Leaders recently approved a multi-million dollar State assistance package to help the fiscally ailing seashore resort town. But with the other hand, they are attempting to dismantle the city's economic engine – in the name of the people. To further complicate the situation State's fiscal monitor just announced his resignation effective June 30th.

I can remember in the late 70's when my grandmother made a special trip to visit us because Atlantic City had just opened up Casino Gambling. We all loaded up on the AC Casino Express Bus. What a bargain! A package fare that included vouchers for practically free everything. So off to AC we went, spending the day marveling at the new Casino at the beach. I remember my grandmother remarking that it was going to be good for the city she had traveled to during her newlywed years.

Fast-forward 38 years later. Atlantic City is experiencing some of the hardest times that, arguably, any U.S. City has seen. Losing residents, businesses and jobs, not to mention half of its casinos leaving the city broke. We could all spend an eternity discovering how it was possible for millions, if not billions, to flow through Atlantic City over the years leaving it in its current condition. However, earlier this year, Atlantic City announced that it could not meet its payroll, requiring cuts in city services, lay-offs and/or working for I.O.U.s for essential employees. While for months, our State Legislators bickered among themselves over a workable fix. The Governor, from the presidential campaign trail, issued a reminiscent of 1975 "Ford To City: Drop Dead" statement indicating that there would be no help without a complete State takeover. So back and forth our leaders went while the Atlantic City community continued teetering on the brink of further economic disaster.

Finally, in late spring the adults came together and agreed on a bailout package that would give cash strapped Atlantic City some much needed aid and breathing room to create a fiscal plan to move forward. The plan provides \$75 million in loans with an additional annual \$120 million in a casino PILOT program over ten years. Of course, the fiscal bailout plan contains conditions and monitoring benchmarks.

As a former Mayor of Asbury Park, I know how important that assistance is, we worked to rebuild a dilapidated and broke city with double digit million dollar deficits into a seaside destination. It was with the help of the State transitional aid and incentives, similar to what is being provided to Atlantic City that gave us the support, guidance and breathing room to put into place a successful community based economic plan. Atlantic City now has that same chance, to rebuild a city for its residents and business

community, while at the same time leveraging its primary economic engine – the Casino industry and beachfront – to create a Jersey Shore destination.

So now that State Leaders have come together, passed the bailout bill and had it signed by the Governor, what is their next step? Putting forth a plan which would allow Casino gambling in Northern New Jersey. Basically, pulling what's left of the economic rug out from under Atlantic City. It's been called a "window of opportunity". Something that the people should vote on, aka leaders hiding a bad decision behind a public referendum.

When you are committing State Funds on an economic rescue package worth hundreds of millions of dollars, you don't turn around and then steal their economic engine. That is exactly what the Casinos in the North plan will do. It will weaken an already fragile economic engine and attraction unique only to Atlantic City. Even worse, it is purposely taking action to undermine the very project we using public funds to prop up.

We are all familiar with the pressures to find alternate revenue sources at every level of government. Because we know that the people of New Jersey already pay enough taxes. In fact, too much! But what we fail to acknowledge is that the money we raise isn't the problem, it is our priorities, spending and detrimental fiscal actions that is the problem.

As leaders each of us has a duty to fight for our constituents. To gather the resources and opportunities necessary to strengthen and grow our communities. But you don't do it to the detriment of your neighbor. And that is exactly what this plan will do – it will rob Atlantic City of its remaining economic foundation. That is not who we are or what we stand for in New Jersey.

We can do better.