

**THE
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One step forward

Promise of \$1 million for Falls airport terminal could pay big dividends

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The commission charged with allocating Niagara Falls' share of \$9 million in casino revenue has made its choices, and the results are mixed. But if Mayor Vince Anello follows through on his pledge to give \$1 million of the city's share for work on a new airport terminal, then perhaps this panel will have helped the city reach a true turning point in its fortunes.

The key to revitalizing Niagara Falls rests with tourism. But the outdated terminal at the Niagara Falls International Airport can't efficiently handle large numbers of visitors. A new terminal is mandatory if that airport is to lose its status as a white elephant.

Lawrence Meckler, executive director of the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority, has said that when the money is delivered, the authority will begin design work for a new terminal, which is expected to cost between \$23 million and \$25 million. He said designs could be completed by the end of the year.

It then will be up to the state - especially the city's Albany delegation - to make sure that next year's casino revenue goes all or mostly to the terminal to finally give Niagara Falls an airport that can take advantage of the area's assets. In addition to the falls themselves, there are casinos, Buffalo's Darwin Martin House and other area architecture and world-class golf courses on the Ontario side. What better draw for tourists? All that's needed is an airport that can accommodate large numbers of tourists.

State Sen. George Maziarz, who fought hard to use casino money for a new terminal, said he thinks he can find \$2 million in funds to supplement the \$1 million from Niagara Falls. That, in addition to further money from casino revenue, could at last give this troubled city the airport it needs to drive economic development.

The \$1 million for the airport, if it's sent to the NFTA, will save the commission from otherwise being a resounding disappointment. The best use of the casino money would have been to invest in projects that hold the promise of creating jobs. Instead, much of it went to the city's general fund and toward low-income housing. Those needs may be real, but those are not investments that are going to create jobs.

To be fair, the five-member commission did send \$2.2 million to two tourism engines. The Niagara Tourism and Convention Corp., a countywide marketing agency, got \$1 million, and the Conference Center Niagara Falls, a \$17 million state-built facility that has bookings beginning in May, was allocated \$1.22 million for staffing and initial costs. But the need for a new terminal is vital to building economic development in Niagara Falls. Assemblywoman Francine DeMonte has said she will pursue more money for the airport from the state's share of casino proceeds next year. We'll be watching to see if she keeps that promise. Maziarz, as usual, was the voice of reason in Niagara County.

Niagara Falls needs nothing as much as economic development, and that starts with a functioning airport.

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