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FREEHOLDER VICARI ADDRESSES MAYORS ASSOCIATION

TOMS RIVER – Superstorm Sandy may have struck Ocean County almost 18 months ago but with the recovery in full swing, the County continues to see great strides in its revitalization.

“This storm had a great and far-reaching impact on Ocean County,” said Ocean County Freeholder Director Joseph H. Vicari in recently addressing the Ocean County Mayors Association. “But we are rebuilding and we are coming back better and stronger.”

Vicari said that as a result of the storm, the county’s ratable base or the collective value of all properties in the county decreased another \$300 million. The initial drop in the base following the storm combined with a downturn in the economy was about \$10 billion. The ratable base is currently \$90.8 billion.

“As we move forward in our recovery from Superstorm Sandy and as real estate rebuilds so will the tax base relieving pressure on the tax rate,” Vicari said. “Yet we can’t just sit and wait for the recovery to take place. We are doing what we can to help it along.”

Vicari said that with the creation of the Business Development and Tourism division of County government greater emphasis is being placed on assisting both seasonal and year-round businesses in Ocean County and encouraging more tourism.

“Tourism brings more than \$4.3 billion into Ocean County annually,” Vicari said. “We need to support this industry as it provides almost 70,000 jobs a year.

“We need to grow tourism and we need to encourage businesses to open their doors here in Ocean County,” Vicari said.

Vicari said greater emphasis is being placed on working with Joint Base – McGuire, Dix, Lakehurst which straddles Ocean and Burlington counties.

“The Joint Base has the second largest workforce in New Jersey with more than 40,600 direct jobs,” Vicari said. “It provides 63,000 indirect jobs in Burlington, Monmouth and Ocean counties.”

Vicari said the Ocean County Board of Chosen Freeholders is a staunch supporter of the Joint Base and will do all it can to fend off any future threats from the Base Realignment and Closure Commission.

“We will continue our work with the base to make sure it grows its mission and remains viable for our country’s security,” Vicari said.

Vicari said Ocean County is working with the base to make sure civilian and military personnel there tap into what Ocean County has to offer.

“It’s important they patronize our businesses, visit our attractions and enjoy all that Ocean County has to offer,” he said.

Vicari added it was also time to get a rail line into Ocean County to get commuters, tourists, and residents off of antiquated roadways like the state’s Route 9 and into a more convenient and more accessible way to travel.

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“We have talked about a rail line as a means of transportation for Ocean County residents for more than three decades,” Vicari said. “However all of our efforts with the federal and state governments have yet to be heard. We need this rail line and we need it now.”

Vicari said two county budget expenditures that are important to note are the increased appropriation to the Ocean County Board of Social Services and funds to replace aging heavy equipment that was also strained by Superstorm Sandy and the rough winter weather.

In the 2014 budget, the Board of Social Services will receive an additional \$1.678 million to help the county’s most vulnerable and needy citizens raising the county appropriation to \$23,276,080. More than \$600 million for social services programs is distributed annually in Ocean County.

“With changes in eligibility for such programs as food stamps and Medicare, and a lingering downturn in the economy, our Social Service agencies have seen their numbers increase substantially,” Vicari said. “More than 12,000 people a month visit social services for assistance. This money will help those who are in need.”

Vicari added that educational programs like those offered at the Ocean County Vocational Technical Schools and Ocean County College are key to help not just the traditional student but also the unemployed and under employed in Ocean County.

“We have to work together to prevent this cycle of poverty,” Vicari said. “It’s important programs are in place to help provide educational opportunities, employment opportunities and access to information.”

The Freeholders, in the 2014 budget, are providing \$14.7 million and \$17.6 million to Ocean County College and Ocean County Vocational Technical Schools respectively.

“This funding helps our students receive a quality education that is affordable,” he said. “It is an opportunity that gives everyone the chance to a bright future.”