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Port Authority vibrant part of community's success

When Pentagon brass decided to close the old Newark Air Force Base in 1993, local alarm bells rang loud and true.

With about 1,500 jobs at risk in Heath, the news was grim and the outlook bleak for quite some time.

Then a group of local leaders came to the rescue, proposing to privatize the base's operations with private employers taking over parts of the facility to fix guidance systems on missiles and a host of other former military jobs.

Not every job was saved. In fact, hundreds were lost. It still was a miraculous success.

The story has been well documented throughout the years, but we were reminded recently of how far our community has come in the 16 years since that date.

The Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority -- which took over ownership of the property and leases buildings to private companies such as Boeing for its 614 employees alone -- has become much more than just a landlord for one Fortune 100 company and four of the top 20 defense contractors.

The Port Authority has become a vital local economic development catalyst, playing a role in several projects, including the acquisition of new employer Samuel Manu-Tech and a reported 100 jobs on its property a few years ago. It's constantly seeking other companies for open land nearby.

The authority, which works as a land bank, property manager, developer and financier, has become a vital part of the local economy, and it has even bolder plans to reinvest its income for more jobs in the future.

Among them are acquiring two additional industrial sites, which would triple its land holdings to 1,000 acres where future jobs would be created.

The authority also currently is working to extend James Parkway to Irving Wick Drive at the old base, creating a faster corridor for trucks to reach Ohio 79 and Interstate 70. To the north, a new interchange at Cherry Valley Road and Ohio 16 combined with improvements to Thornwood Drive also would aid the Port Authority's efforts.

Future plans call for more transportation improvements in the area, including roads, bridges and rail crossings.

It's one of our community's best success stories, one worth telling any time.
