

Low Country Regional Airport: Another Key To Colleton's Economic Future

Airport Manager Tommy Rowe and Economic Development Director Peter Arnotti discuss the airport's future Wednesday.



photo by Billy Bruce

By **BILLY BRUCE**

Second in a series:

WALTERBORO – Planning for the area's economic future means being ready for growth today.

That's how two key economic leaders expressed their views as to why they believe the Low Country Regional Airport just outside of city limits is a key cog in the wheel of the area's ability to attract new business and industry.

Airport Manager Tommy Rowe and Colleton County Economic Alliance Executive Director Peter Arnotti said the airport and its sweeping improvements due to local commitment has positioned the county in a healthy position to lure more economy boosting jobs to the area.

Arnotti, who retires in January after more than six years of playing a prominent role in guiding Colleton's much improved economic forecast, said the airport's regional recognition has grown as a result of an awakening of local leaders to the expanded role an aviation-based site can play.

"The difference now since I first arrived is that there is a realization that the airport has far more possibilities for utilization than just being a fine airport," he said, as he and Rowe muzzled black coffees on a chilly morning at the airport's main terminal Wednesday morning.

Sitting at a long table inside the terminal's main conference room, the two men reviewed an array of facts and statistics to reveal why they think Colleton is getting ahead in the game to bring more jobs to the area.

"For any activity to occur at the airport, you have to be prepared," Arnotti said. "We have a lot going for us."

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Just as local education offerings, infrastructure improvements like the Colleton County Commerce Park, an improvement of communication lines between local leaders, and a sprucing up of the area's aesthetic image are extremely important to creating a unified base that is attractive to prospective industries, the airport is a key part in that menu, they said.

"We have the largest general aviation airport in South Carolina, and we have the fourth largest airport, period, of any in the state, based on square footage of runways alone," Rowe said.

The airport has three runways ranging in length from 5,500 feet to more than 7,000 feet—the latter being the primary runway has been resurfaced and enhanced by a parallel taxiway. That taxiway is one of many of the airport's components that draws favor from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), they said.

"That main runway can handle a (Boeing) 737," Rowe said. "There's actually this one fellow from Miami who flies in here occasionally in his privately owned 737."

But don't get any ideas. The airport probably will never handle commercial flights. With the county's close proximity to commercial service in Charleston and Savannah, Colleton need not compete for unneeded pursuits, they said.

But there are other FAA favorites that many competing airports don't offer—like having plenty of undeveloped land surrounding the airport.

The lack of residential homes on neighboring par-

cels means airport planners don't have to worry about potential development-disrupting protests from airport neighbors, should good prospects poke their heads in the door to consider setting up shop, they said.

"There is 1,000 acres in bufferage--owned by the airport—that is undevelopable," Arnotti said. "We have a lot of elbow room, and that's the right answer to a key question when trying to lure business."

The airport's list of incentives and features continued to grow longer as Arnotti and Rowe checked off on one improvement after another. Included in the list are:

The airport's cheap aviation fuel prices and its on-site base of mobile fuel trucks that can allow pilots to avoid difficult taxiing to fixed fuel depots as they must at airports not in possession of the mobile trucks. The commission contracts with High Place Aviation, a locally owned firm, to provide airport services, including the refueling operations.

"We keep it a dollar lower, per gallon, that Savannah and Charleston," Rowe said. "I've had pilots stop in here to refuel when nearby Charleston was their destination. When you consider that a larger corporate jet like a Gulfstream carries 4,000 gallons, that's a \$4,000 savings just to stop here to refuel. It's well worth it for a lot of pilots to stop in. Yet even with our discount, aviation fuel sales are still very profitable. The fuel operation keeps the airport afloat."

"The airport has enjoyed a 10 percent to 20 percent annual increase in fuel sales for the past 10 years, Rowe noted.

The airport's expansion of T-hangars for companies or private owners to use to garage planes at the airport. Prospective industries that

use planes always inquire about the availability of such facilities, they said.

"In October, we completed a 10-unit T-hangar, and all but one of the units are rented. The last one will be rented next week," Rowe said. "We're in the process of drawing up plans for another 10-unit T-hangar. We do have the demand."

The technical side of running a modern airport in the 21st Century has not caught airport planners off guard by any stretch of their imagination, the men said.

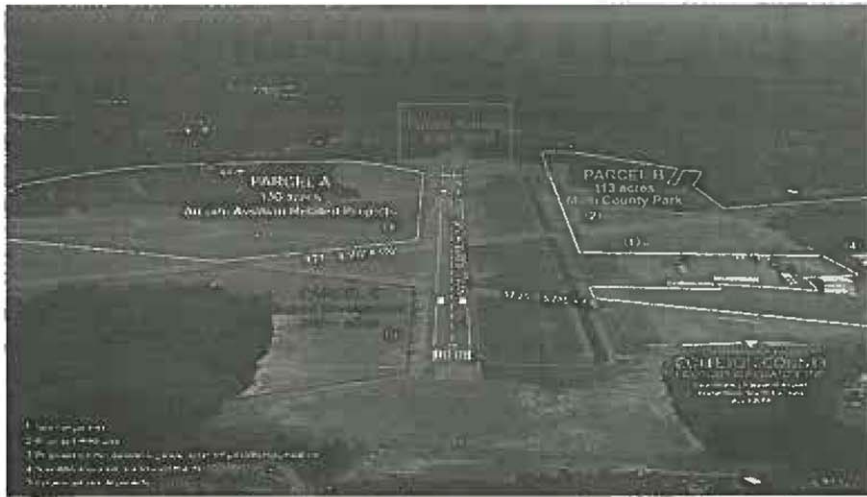
Two years ago, the airport became one of the first of 60 airports nationally to get an Automatic Surveillance Dependent Broadcast (ASDB) tower installed by the FAA.

"It's better than radar and will replace a lot of radar stations," said Rowe, who was a U.S. Navy pilot. "If you have that equipment in your airplane, the system tells you the location and speed of any aircraft operating in area skies. It can fit in any plane."

"The airport offers pilots Instrument Landing System (ILS) for precision approaches—an important tool when flying in bad weather. The ILS came after the old non-directional beacon (NDB) system, which is still in place. A majority of the money to install the ILS came from the FAA, Rowe said.

"The FAA provided 95 percent of the money, while the state split the remaining 5 percent with the airport commission," he said. "So we only had to pay 2.5 percent of the cost."

The local cost is covered



The county airport offers three development zones for prospective businesses.

from fuel sale profits, land and timber sales, T-hangar rentals and aviation maintenance profits.

The FAA is reimbursing the airport for its purchase of 85 acres of land near the end of the main runway, Rowe added. "When you do things right, the FAA is glad to help," he said. The land could be used for future runway extension.

Property tax incentives are a tasty bait when competing for prospective airport business, and the local airport—thanks to the vision of airport commissioners—has sumptuous offerings in that critical category.

The county entered into a multi-county agreement with Hampton County that has enabled the airport to offer a "Job Tax Credit" of up to \$4,500-per-job created to any new industry that locates on 113 airside acres designated at the airport in the multi-county agreement.

"We are a moderately developed area and Hampton is an under-developed area," Arnoti explained. "As a moderately developed area, we could offer a Job Tax Credit of \$3,500 per job created. But tying in with under-developed Hampton, we can increase that here to \$4,500 per job created."

"Also, the airport com-

mission has convinced Colleton County government to slash the property tax assessment on domiciled aircraft—planes that use the airport for base—from 10.5 percent to 4 percent.

"A G-5 corporate jet worth \$38 million on the tax roll, at the reduced 4 percent rate, will generate the same amount of property tax revenue as 190 primary residential homes worth \$200,000 and taxed at the same 4 percent rate," Arnoti explained.

"When you can generate tax revenues through just one plane, you're not gobbling up land like a residential development would, and you're not impacting local infrastructure like water and sewer. So the Job Tax Credit presents us with a great economic opportunity."

"Regional aviation activity also provides the local airport with more possibilities. The Boeing Dreamliner project in Charleston and the Beaufort Marine Air Base's obtaining of the F-35 Strike Fighter war plane are just a few of those activities that can be drawn on locally for airport development,

they said.

"We've got the technical expertise locally to help those operations not have to farm out a problem to, say, Wichita," Rowe explained.

"They also open up opportunities for us to draw them here to set up shop," Arnoti said.

Add in the addition six years ago of a pilots' lounge, where visiting crews can rest, and a provision of two available Crown Victorias for the crews to use to go into town for a meal or just to check out the local area, and the Low Country Regional Airport's offerings continue to mount as local economic leaders position the county for luring more jobs, they said.

"Before the lounge, you could find pilots taking nap in the public lobby," Rowe said.

"The more people find us, the more they like the experience," Arnoti said. "The passengers love the convenience."

"The airport has recently made the short list for several potential industries vying for new locations, Arnoti said.

"The more often we get this airport exposed, the greater the chance is that we will have for that type of expansion to occur," he said.

Literally, the past decade has seen so many significant improvements come to the airport that it's only a matter of time until all of the efforts to put the airport or the aviation map come to fruition, they said.

"It's only a matter of time," Arnoti said.