



Accolades fly high at pivotal airpark celebration

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Wednesday, June 03, 2009

An official from the N.C. Department of Commerce told a crowd of about 100 at the "Take-Off Celebration" for the airpark Wednesday evening that aeronautics is a key component in growing the state out of the current deep recession.

Deputy Commerce Secretary Dale Carroll said he would be proud to return to Raleigh and report to Gov. Beverly Perdue the progress being made in Elizabeth City at the Elizabeth City-Pasquotank Aviation Research and Commerce Development Park.

Wednesday's celebration marked the completion of the taxiway and site improvements for the 63-acre first phase of the \$13 million airpark. The project was completed on schedule and within budget.

Airpark proponents estimate the park eventually could add as many as 2,000 jobs.

Albemarle Economic Development Commission Director Wayne Harris said that each hangar at the park represents about 150 jobs. The first phase includes sites for four hangars plus the aviation education facility for Elizabeth City State University and College of The Albemarle.

Harris thanked the Department of Commerce for providing the seed money that made the airpark enterprise possible. He also thanked the Golden LEAF Foundation, N.C. Rural Center and N.C. Department of Transportation Aviation Division.

Golden LEAF President Dan Gerlach said Wichita and Seattle had dominated the aviation industry for too long.

"We're trying to bring it here," Gerlach said.

Carroll said Perdue had identified the defense supply chain — especially aeronautics — as one of the three key components in the state's economic growth. More than 250 companies in aerospace and aviation have operations in the state, he said.

Among those companies, he said, are seven of the 10 largest defense aerospace firms: Boeing, Lockheed-Martin, General Dynamics, GE Aviation, L-3 Communications, Northrup Grumman, and Raytheon.

Carroll said the Department of Commerce is working internationally to recruit aviation companies to the state. He commended the private sector, including DRS Technologies and TCOM, for its role in employing people and building the tax base.

Gerlach said Golden LEAF looks forward to continued support of the airpark.

"You keep bringing us jobs — you keep bringing us investment — we want to keep being your partner," Gerlach said.

Gerlach commended Elizabeth City State University and College of the Albemarle for its partnership on workforce development in support of the airpark.

ECSU Chancellor Willie Gilchrist and COA President Lynne Bunch strode to the podium together to represent the partnership between the two educational institutions.

Bunch called it an “out-of-the-box” move for the two to walk to the podium at the same time but said the partnership itself is a creative, outside the box arrangement.

Bunch said COA is proud of its Federal Aviation Administration-approved airframe and power plant curriculum.

“We are very excited as well,” Gilchrist said, noting enrollment in the university’s aviation program already had grown from 30 to nearly 150.

And graduates already are finding jobs at DRS and the Coast Guard base, Gilchrist said.

Harris said education is important to the airpark’s success.

Gerlach said an “aviation cluster in the east” — including the Elizabeth City-Pasquotank airpark and facilities in Kinston and elsewhere — is important to the state’s strategy for confronting Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) and keeping Cherry Point Marine Air Station open in Craven County.

Elizabeth City Mayor Pro-tempore Jean Baker, who was representing Mayor Steve Atkinson, said the airpark was a great way for Golden LEAF to collaborate with public and private sources to generate new jobs.

She recognized Bobby Vaughan, who had been the first chairman of the airport committee — a precursor to the Airport Authority Board.

Vaughan told The Daily Advance after the ceremony that the airport had come a long way since the airport committee days.

“This project was a dream back then,” Vaughn said.

Atkinson, in a statement released Wednesday by the AEDC, said “the aviation park is testament to what can be accomplished when local and state governments work together to build a business friendly environment in Northeastern North Carolina.”

Pasquotank Commission Chairman Marshall Stevenson spoke of the employment opportunities created by the airpark.

“We think this is a tremendous day in the history of this county for the employment of our children and our grandchildren,” Stevenson said. He thanked Commissioner Lloyd Griffin and Assistant County Manager Rodney Bunch for their work on the project and added Airport Director Scott Hinton and City Manager Rich Olson.

Airport Authority Chairman Wayne Perry thanked Hugh Clinkscales, a former chairman and “good mentor.”

Perry said he was proud of the opportunity to serve the city and county as chairman of the authority.

“This is going to create more jobs,” Perry said, adding that would build the economy and generate more business for everybody.

“I just thank everybody that has made this possible,” he said.

AEDC Chairman Matt Wood recognized airpark partners and gave mementos to speakers, Golden Lead Board members and representatives of other funding agencies.

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