

# Aviation Park Takes Flight

**Project nets \$3.5M grant to buy land**

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A proposed aviation research and commerce park at the Elizabeth City Regional Airport officially took flight Friday, as officials announced the awarding of a \$3.5 million state grant for the project.

Airport manager Scott Hinton said the Economic Development Reserve Grant was approved by the N.C. Department of Commerce, and will be used to buy 64 acres of farmland east of the airport for the planned Elizabeth City Aviation Research and Development Commerce Park.

"We are making history in Elizabeth City North Carolina today right here in this room," Hinton said at a press conference in the airport's lounge Friday morning.

Attending the announcement were officials of the Elizabeth City-Pasquotank Regional Airport Authority, Pasquotank County, Elizabeth City, Elizabeth City State University, College of The Albemarle and the Albemarle Economic Development Commission. Each agency is a partner in the \$10.4 million aviation research and commerce park project.

According to officials, the project calls for the expansion of ECSU's aviation science program and the development of commercial businesses at the airport.

In the project's first phase, ECSU will build an aviation science education center on 20 acres near the Crosswinds subdivision, Hinton said. The center may include three, two-story buildings, each of which would be 130,000 square feet.

The remaining 44 acres could contain up to five 75,000-square-foot industrial buildings, each built on 5.8-acre lots, Hinton said.

If things go as planned, as many as 500 "good-paying" jobs will be created at the airport over the next 3-5 years and \$150 million in private investment will be pumped into the local economy, Airport Authority Chairman Wayne Perry said.

"I see nothing but growth, great things ahead," Perry said.

The 64 acres needed for the aviation park will be purchased from the Hollowell Family Limited Partnership. Airport officials have been negotiating the sale of the land since last year.

State Rep. Bill Owens, D-Pasquotank, originally sought \$8 million to assist the land purchase and pay for site work for the project. That request was slashed by a House committee, however, to \$4 million, then removed altogether from last year's final budget.

Owens then sought \$4 million for the project from a \$10 million economic development fund that was included in the final state budget.

While not the \$8 million they originally had hoped for, local officials were nonetheless pleased with Friday's announcement, saying the \$3.5 million will enable the project to move forward.

ECSU Vice Chancellor Richard Lucas said the public-private venture "is very significant to the university" because it will offer students "real-world training" as well as aviation-related jobs once they graduate.

"We want our kids ... to benefit from those jobs," Lucas said.

COA President Lynne Bunch said the project creates an "opportunity" to partner with ECSU and expand COA's computer technician, machinist and electronics training programs.

City Manager Rich Olson and Pasquotank County Manager Randy Keaton said the commerce park part of the project will benefit the city and county by creating more tax revenues.

Olson said it may be several months before local residents see construction at the airport. He said the city plans to provide sewer and electric services to the aviation park, while the county will provide water to the site.

Hinton said the state Department of Transportation will conduct a traffic study to determine what changes in street width or speed limit will be needed for Consolidated Road. The road is heavily used, especially in the early morning and afternoon, by employees of the nearby U.S. Coast Guard base.

Before the project can move forward, the Pasquotank Board of Commissioners will have to approve the airport's rezoning requests for the property, Hinton said. Forty-four acres would be rezoned from agricultural use to industrial use, while the remaining 20 acres set aside for ECSU's aviation science program would be rezoned for office and institutional use, he said.

Officials have identified potential sources of revenue for the project's remaining \$6.9 million cost, Olson said. At least \$2.5 million would come from airport authority land lease revenues. Another \$3.57 million has been requested in Golden LEAF funding, and the remaining \$941,500 would come from the coffers of Elizabeth City, Pasquotank County and the airport authority.

Also attending Friday's press conference were Matt Wood and Anita Hummer, vice chairman and chairwoman, respectively, of the Albemarle Economic Development Commission.

Wood, also a Pasquotank commissioner, said the project is unique in part because it capitalizes on assets such as the Coast Guard base and DRS-TAMSCO.

"This is really a very innovative model," Wood said. "We're building on what we already have."