



Collin airport spreads its wings

Runway projects may put facility on path to land commercial flights

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The Collin County Regional Airport is poised to take off into a new era, with new facilities on the ground and a new board to guide its flight.

On Friday, the airport held a ribbon-cutting ceremony for a \$6.5 million reconstruction and resurfacing of its runway. The work literally paves the way for the runway to eventually become a taxiway parallel to a \$56 million runway to be finished in late 2012. A new, more modern control tower also will be built.

The runway projects are being done to accommodate corporate jets that are heavier than in the past – and possibly commercial passenger planes, if the airport lands such a carrier and becomes a Collin County version of Love Field.

During the ceremony, Collin County Judge Keith Self called the airport "the No. 1 economic driver" for the county, a role that will only be enhanced should it get scheduled passenger service.

Airport Director Ken Wiegand knows the big question is when the airport will land a commercial carrier – especially since it seems to take longer and longer for Collin County residents to get to Love Field or Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport.

But even if an airline decides the McKinney-area population is large enough to risk such a venture, many issues will need to be worked out.

"I'll have to talk with the board about where they want to go with that," Mr. Wiegand said. "I know there's a deep-seated interest in the business community, the county and the city about obtaining commercial service, and this staff is prepared to seek that once we get that direction."

Such direction could come largely from the board of the new McKinney Airport Development Corp., which will take over guiding economic development and other matters at the airfield. The board is filled with corporate executives and holds more authority and autonomy from the City Council than the citizen advisory board of the past.

City officials, including Mr. Wiegand, Mayor Bill Whitfield and City Attorney Mark Houser, say the advisory board did its job well. But the new board, as a separate corporation akin to an economic development corporation, will be able to focus on airport projects and day-to-day operational questions in a way that the City Council cannot.

"This board would be in charge of its own budget," Mr. Whitfield said recently. "The council will fund the budget, but the board will have the ability to hire and fire an executive director, just like the City Council can with a city manager. If someone wants to come in here and do economic development or they want a hangar, that's what they're there for."

The new board comprises seven executives who live and work in Collin County.

"We're trying to put business practices to work in government," the mayor said.

The recommendations for another runway, an airport corporation and a southern connector street to enable economic development at the airport came after a larger group of executives viewed McKinney from the air.

"This was a group of nonpolitical people," Mr. Whitfield said. "They're looking at it as, just what needs to take place for the region to be prepared for the growth that's going to happen over the next 20 years? The last piece of the puzzle was, get an airport development board. Their reasoning was, take politics out of it. You have to get politics out of it if you want to develop. A lot of people take the short term; they don't take the long view of 20 years out."

The middle view – five years out – is of the new runway. It will be 150 feet wide instead of the current 100. It will match the current runway's 7,000-foot length, but land will be graded to eventually extend it by 1,000 feet.

The federal government will pay about \$30 million of the new runway's \$56 million cost, Mr. Wiegand said, while the state is expected to chip in about \$12 million. About \$7 million to \$8 million will come from McKinney's economic development corporation, which is funded through sales taxes; the city is likely to contribute \$5.5 million, he said.

The Texas Transportation Commission approved \$4.9 million on Nov. 15 for the design of a replacement runway and control tower. It is the first of several expected grants to build the new runway about 550 feet east of the current one. The November grant money also included \$180,000 to begin construction of the new, \$3 million control tower in late 2008.

The existing control tower was constructed and used as a temporary facility at Alliance Airport in Fort Worth during the mid-1990s. It was recycled for use in McKinney as an interim tower.

The airport obtained another prerequisite for commercial service two months ago: an \$800,000 airport firetruck and rescue vehicle that can spray 3,000 gallons of foam on fuel-based fires and has infrared cameras to detect hotspots or victims in wreckage.

"The reality is the customers at the McKinney airport already are receiving a higher level of service than is required," Assistant Fire Chief Frank Roma said.