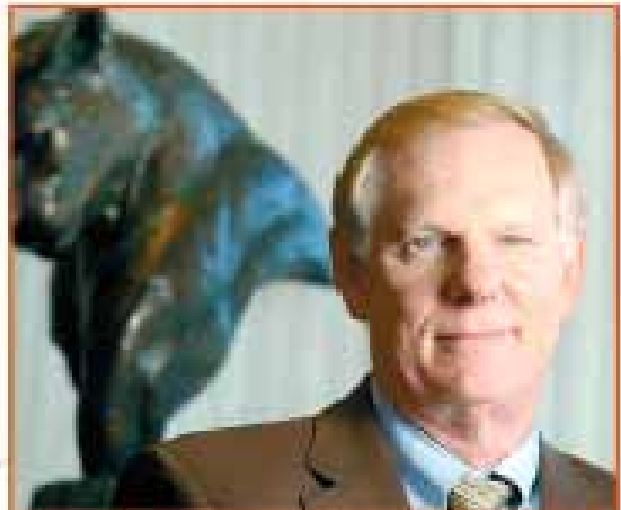


SOUTHWESTERN ILLINOIS



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Change is in the airports

Downtown Airport awaits 65-acre development; MidAmerica goes international; Regional sees \$11 million expansion

BY JIM BAER

In the world of local air travel, Lambert-St. Louis International Airport can command the headlines, which means the airports in Southwestern Illinois fly under the radar, so to speak.

But that's not to say there isn't much going on there; quite the opposite is true, in fact. Here's a wrap-up of what's taking place at MidAmerica St. Louis Airport in Mascoutah, St. Louis Downtown Airport in Cahokia and St. Louis Regional Airport in Bethalto.

St. Louis Downtown Airport

Downtown Airport is a hub of construction activity.

In one project, the Federal Aviation Administration is finishing the construction of a \$7 million control tower that stands 138 feet tall and has a 5,000-square-foot administrative facility at its base. The tower must undergo testing, and it is slated to become fully operational May 1, 2008. Plocher Construction of Highland is the general contractor on the project.

The tower will replace the airport's current tower, which was built in 1973 and designed to last 15 years, said the airport's director, Robert McDaniel.

Meanwhile, Midcoast Aviation, which moved nearly its entire operation from Lambert to Downtown Airport in 2005, is building a \$17.5 million, 145,000-square-foot hangar that will house six large jets. Midcoast received \$4 million from the Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity for the project. H&H Construction of Carlinville, Ill., is the general contractor on the project.

Midcoast, a unit of Jet Aviation Management AG of Zurich, Switzerland, specializes in completing and customizing business aircraft by installing such things as seats, upholstery, furniture and advanced avionics system.

Midcoast has 650,000 square feet of facilities at the airport and has created 200 new jobs with its recent projects.

Martin Aviation Group also has plans for the airport, at which it is based; the company wants to develop 65 acres on

the south side of the complex. Plans call for retail space, hangars and offices. McDaniel said Martin officials are holding discussions with several companies but have not revealed any names. He said the plan is for ground to be broken in a year, though he could not give a cost.

"Martin is looking for a commitment for most of the space before breaking ground and talking to an international company to relocate headquarters there," McDaniel said.

Korte Co. is the general contractor.

In a separate project, a new taxiway to the main runway is being constructed at a cost of \$636,000 by Thelms Construction of Edwardsville.

Downtown Airport has some 160,000



VIRGINIA LEE HUNTER

Robert McDaniel has led Downtown Airport through major growth, including Midcoast Aviation's construction of a \$17.5 million hangar.

annual flight operations — which include takeoffs, landings, and touch-and-go operations — and its economic impact on the region is about \$200 million per year, McDaniel said.

"We are very busy. We went from the fifth-busiest airport in all of Illinois to the third (in 2006)," trailing only O'Hare and Midway, both in Chicago, he said.

Downtown Airport has revenue of \$1.3 million. It has nine employees and 1,300 nonairport contract workers. It is a general reliever airport and doesn't handle scheduled commercial passenger traffic.

MidAmerica St. Louis Airport

MidAmerica is looking far beyond the region.

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In February the airport, which shares runways with Scott Air Force Base, became a U.S. port of entry, and in April it received its first international shipments: 1.5 million pounds of Monsanto hybrid corn seed from Panama. Two airlines, Cielos and Centurion, flew the cargo into the airport, avoiding the busy port of Miami. Minnesota-based trucking company C.H. Robinson Worldwide then distributed the seed to terminals across the Midwest.

"We got the seed from Central America here in two days and out to the farmers in the fields in time for the planting season in just two weeks," said the airport's director, Tim Cantwell. "We call it high speed and high value. We believe we can do the same shipping flowers, food, orchids, products grown in Asia and the Middle East and other parts of the world."

Cantwell has kept MidAmerica, which also provides connecting flights and leisure travel flights, focused on developing its international cargo business. He said he anticipates receiving shipments from Southeast Asia by the end of the year.

Attaining port-of-entry status for MidAmerica took three years of coordinating with U.S. Customs and Border Protection on building plans, personnel training and more, Cantwell said.

St. Clair County Board Chairman Mark Kern also played a role in making MidAmerica a port of entry. "It is not cliché anymore to say, 'All business is international business,' because it is a fact of daily life," he said. "And if you are not plugged into the international business, you are extremely challenged to grow — maintaining can happen, but growth is in international reach."

According to Patrick McKeehan, executive director of Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois: "MidAmerica is becoming a hub for international air cargo shipping. With their dual runways (10,000 feet and 8,000 feet), they are becoming an important economic asset to the east side. People just don't appreciate our east-side airport facilities."

Cantwell said he focuses on three priorities: running the best joint-use airport in the nation, creating a hub for international cargo shipping and hosting the leisure travel market. "If this happens, our whole community wins," he said.

MidAmerica has \$5.2 million in annual revenue and employs 11 people, not including contractors. It has 30,000 annual flight operations and 51,500 origination and destination passengers. According to Cantwell, MidAmerica and Scott

combined have an economic impact of \$2.5 billion.

St. Louis Regional Airport

Regional Airport is no stranger to expansion either.

It is not an air carrier airport; instead, it provides aircraft fueling, maintenance and amenities for flight crews and passengers.

Premier Air Center recently did a 30,000-square-foot, \$11 million expansion of its facilities at the airport. Premier runs a full-service repair and overhaul center for Cessna Citation and Dassault Falcon aircraft. It has added about 60 employees.

In addition, Fabritech Inc., which does black-box technology for helicopters and interior fabric work for aircraft used to transport combat troops, recently announced a \$1.7 million investment package at Regional Airport. The company, which currently operates a 25,000 square-foot facility at the airport will more than double its space. It will create 26 new full-time jobs and retain 46 existing jobs, said David Miller, the airport's manager. The expansion is expected to be completed by 2008.

Miller said Regional Airport does 75,000 flight operations per year, using a pair of runways 8,000 and 6,000 feet long. "We're trying to make this area an aviation mecca, and we are well along on that goal," Miller said.

The airport has annual revenue of \$2.3 million and 11 employees, plus 500 contract workers. Miller said it has an economic impact of \$80 million.

Jim Baer is a St. Louis freelance writer.

"If you are not plugged into the international business, you are extremely challenged to grow."

Mark Kern

St. Clair County Board Chairman