

Airport

From Page 1

port's runway to accommodate larger aircraft and the possibilities of acquiring more land and having additional buildings available for new tenants.

He even believes that some form of passenger flight service may eventually come to the airport, although he doesn't predict when that may occur.

"That may be five years or 20 years down the road," he said.

Several decades ago, some people may have been skeptical if someone predicted all that would happen.

That was when the race track was the focus of attention, said Roger Smith of Carter Aircraft Inc.

For years, he said, the airport operated the race. Although the event brought in a lot of revenue, that didn't translate into considerable growth for the airport, he said.

"Any funds (netted) went into promoting the race. It provided the funds, but it seemed to take a lot of manpower to do that," he said.

Most of the people running the airport at the time were not personally involved in aviation, he said.

Smith and others say the decision to separate the management of the race track and the airport facilities changed all that.

He also said that Willingham deserves a lot of the credit for the change in direction.

But at the same time, Willingham said, he sees the airport as more than just a facility where airplanes land and take off.

In an article, he wrote, he said he has developed a vision of the "airport property as a platform for economic growth."

The airport has the facilities and land to achieve that vision, he said. It sits on a 20,000-acre business park that provides jobs for nearly 500 people, he said.

Although many of the new industries began with relatively few employees, Willingham said, he believes the airport could accommodate an employer who wanted to hire several hundred employees.

But currently many of the tenants provide steady jobs for smaller numbers of employees.

Carter Aircraft Inc., a longtime business at the airport, provides maintenance services, inspections and repairs for aircraft, Lewis said. He said the business was started by Charlie Carter. Lewis said he worked for Carter and eventually bought part of the business from Carter.

Much of his business comes from out of the area, Carter said. His business's reputation brings in new and repeat customers.

The central location of the airport in Florida is a major drawing point.

Gulf Coast Supply and Manufacturing, which manufactures metal roofs, was one of those companies seeking a central location.



RYAN PELHAM/STAFF

Above: Thomas LaPerriere works on an AirCam plane at Lockwood Aviation's shop at the Sebring Regional Airport on Wednesday. **Left:** Everett Williston prepares to take off from Sebring Regional Airport to fly back home to Winter Haven after attending the weekly fly-in breakfast on Wednesday. Williston said he had worked at McDonnell Douglas, where he helped design the F-15 fighter jet.

Jerry Lockette, vice president of finance, said they started in Sebring with two employees, including himself, and they now have 30.

The company, based near Gainesville, wanted to expand its market to South Florida, he said. The Sebring facility handles all business south of Interstate 4, he said.

Originally, Gulf Coast projected around \$600,000 a month in business at this point, he said. In actuality, the amount is \$1 million a month.

"It took off quicker than we ever thought it would," he said.

Lockette said the facility they have at the airport will accommodate expansion. He said he expects they will hire more employees. They plan to add more equipment and possibly increase the number of shifts if the business necessitates that.

"We're in good shape facility-wise for a number of years," Lockette said.

FLG Teardowns also considered Sebring in large part because of the central location of the airport, said Michael Elkaim, president of FLG Technics, the parent company located in Davie.

The company will be disassembling retired aircraft and selling and recycling the parts, he said.

He said FLG representatives attend conventions with the goal of making potential customers more familiar with the facility.

In the long run, he said, the goal is to do maintenance as well, but that depends on the expansion of the runway so that larger aircraft can arrive and take off.

Both Lockette and Elkaim said that it's been good to work with Willingham and his staff.

While many come to Florida to be near the beach, Phil Lockwood, owner of Lockwood Aviation and Supply, said he sees an advantage to being located in an airport in the middle of the state.

It's not affected by air from the ocean, which is corrosive, he said. Overall, Lockwood said, the Sebring airport has a lot to offer.

"It's just kind of a neat place to be," he said.

After building a facility in 1993, he said, Lockwood has expanded to include a flight school, AirCam and an airplane service facility. AirCam is a twin-engine experimental aircraft developed by Lockwood.

"We just kept expanding what we do," Lockwood said.

Lockwood said he travels around the world and visits other airports. "That helps me to appreciate what we have here," he said.

Lockwood said he believes the airport in many ways has contributed to the growth of Highlands County.

"A lot of people come here just because the airport is here," he said.

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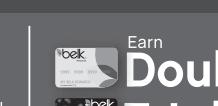
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