Chris Crusta Memorial Airport, the second-fastest-growing charter airport in the state, is poised to become a major offshore helicopter hub with $2 million in planned improvements.

Gillam said about 20 new jobs will be created by the terminal and hangar work. He said the only airport of its size and its top-notch maintenance building with hangars is poised to become a major offshore helicopter hub with $2 million in planned improvements.

Safety upgrades have included the creation of strict takeoff and landing patterns; the segregation of fixed wing and helicopter areas; placement of heli-pads; stripping of restricted access roads; regular maintenance of orange warning balls on power lines; and regulation of cropduster and aerial pilots. "I wouldn't be going too far in saying that the Abbeville airport is now one of the best run charter airports in the state from a safety standpoint," Fulker son said. "It's come a long way from what it was." Gillam said the only major safety issue remaining is the need to remove trees parallel to the 5,000-foot runway.

"Wind comes over the top and creates turbulence," he said. He said the Louisiana Army National Guard is considering plans to remove the trees as part of a summer training mission.

More jobs

Gillam said about 20 new jobs will be created by the terminal and hangar work. He said the components for five hangars are slated to be delivered by the end of April and up within six to eight weeks after that.

"The land owned by the Cajun Air Force folks is cleared and ready to go," he said. "They are funding the maintenance building on part of their 5.4-acre property state and federal funds are building the heli-pads and a private company based in Broussard has committed to the offshore passenger terminal."

Joey LeRouge of Transition- al Technology Inc. of Brous sard, a part of his High Tech Holdings investment group, said the 5,000-square-foot passenger terminal will run about $500,000. The museum-maintenance building with hangars will cost an estimated $1 million and the hangars another $500,000, he said.

LeRouge said his company agreed to fund the terminal construction after getting a commitment from the city to build a 200-space parking lot. He said he is also involved with the museum project through his venture firm and is a member of Sertoma, the service group and annual air show sponsor in Lafayette.

"We already have a World War II T-6 trainer aircraft and two P-51 Harpoon bombers to exhibit," he said. LeRouge said the trainer is already here, while the bombers are set to be moved from LRA this summer. He said the construction of the museum project is still a year or so down the road.

"The same group of people are involved with all aspects of this, although it's three separate ventures going on all at once," LeRouge said. "First, we want to establish a safer place for offshore crew changes with the smaller helicopter companies, instead of people driving to Intracoastal City or Cameron."

Gillam said commitments are in hand from Tex-Air and American Helicopters, with other companies expected to come on board. He said Abbeville has the safety advantage of being served by major highways such as U.S. Route 167 and La. 14, while Intracoastal City and Cameron are served by two-lane roads with little or no shoulders.

"An airport is a gateway to the community," Gillam said. "Nearly 70 people earn their livelihoods here, and lots of people do business in Abbeville who would go somewhere else if this facility wasn't here."

Major players at Chris Crusta, named for an Italian-American aviation pioneer who came up with the idea of planting rice by air, are Omega, which employs 22 spotter aircraft; Tex-Air and American helicopters, which shuttle energy industry workers offshore. Vector Aviation, the fixed-base operator that sells aviation fuel; and Gilbert Avionics, a radio repair business.

Leading parish industries with hangar space include Broussard Brothers oilfield contractors, Riviana Rice Mill and Steen Syrup Mill.