Development of land needed to attract airport tenants

By Laura Heck
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The future of Acadiana's two regional airports can be compared to the baseball diamond in the movie Field of Dreams. "If you build it, they will come," said Greg Roberts, director of aviation for Lafayette Regional Airport (LRA), quoting from the film.

But instead of the ghosts of past baseball greats, Roberts hopes LRA will attract larger airplanes, more daily flights, additional tenants, international flights and more funding.

"I see a very bright future for Lafayette Regional Airport," he said. "I hope one day soon to call it the Lafayette International Airport."

Rock Lasserre Jr., director of airports for the Iberia Parish Airport Authority, said he hopes Acadiana Regional Airport (ARA) in New Iberia - a general aviation facility - will also attract more business and industry.

To reach their goals, both airports have immediate and long-range plans to use undeveloped land for future expansion.

"To free up facilities for economic development, we need to build something over here," Roberts said about a 30-acre piece of land along Highway 90.

The land is the largest of 15 parcels of property LRA can use to further develop its 1,100 acres.

Donnie Dugal, a Lafayette airport commissioner, said the facility would increase the airport's capital by allowing new tenants to lease space vacated by current tenants, who would move into the new facility.

"We get a lot of demand for FBOs (fixed base operators) and people who would like hangar space," he said.

Dugal said one way to use the land would be to centrally locate Lafayette's Petroleum Helicopter Inc.'s several facilities.

"PHI is so spread out," he said. "It's very inefficient for their operation."

PHI, the world's largest commercial helicopter company, is headquartered at LRA and employs 600 people there. It is also one of the top five largest private employers in Lafayette Parish.

Ben Shrick, chief operating officer and vice president of PHI, said a central facility would combine the company's three large hangars, its operations building and its administration building.

The company would also be able to move its training center from Broussard to Lafayette, he added.

"It would be a big advantage to us," he said. "It would bring all of that together."

Acadiana Regional Airport also has plans to develop its 2,125 acres of land, Lasserre said.

"Our hope lies in our vast land holdings," he said. "We've got four handsomely projects we're working on that will be a great benefit to Iberia Parish and the surrounding parishes."

One project involves transferring 200 acres from the U.S. government for an addition to the Acadiana Regional Industrial Park.

"Lasserre said 26 tenants have located on all but 33 acres of the park's original 125 acres since its start in 1976."

"It will probably not last much longer," he said. "We've filled the first one up and we need to look to the future."

Another project involves the creation of an "intermodal exchange site," he said.

"PHI said that site would involve the transfer of bulk freight items between trucks, rail cars and planes.

"The local industries have expressed a strong need to have such a project here," Lasserre said. "I think it will catch on and we'll eventually see a 20-acre facility develop."

But for now, Lasserre said he has proposed developing only three acres.

"It could provide savings to many local industries," he said. "It would make Iberia Parish more competitive. And it would diversify (the economy) away from a petroleum oil and natural gas economy."

A third project involves the creation of a 100-acre air cargo depot, which would allow bulk goods arriving and departing by plane to be loaded and unloaded via truck.

"This is a very important project for the region because it will impact, not only this airport, but it will impact the Lafayette area and beyond, down to New Orleans," he said.

He explained goods are flown in from South and Central America and Mexico, picked up by trucks and then dispersed through the interstate system.

"Lasserre also said there are plans to expand a large aircraft refurbishing operation."

He said the current operation, which includes aircraft maintenance, painting and modifications, refurbishes an average of 100 airplanes a year.

"If you add all those (projects) up, it says job creation and economic diversification," Lasserre said.

And once jobs are created, payroll and state taxes will come, he added. Local goods and services will also be purchased.

Dugal said Lafayette Regional also owns a lot of "prime property" along Highway 90 that could be used for business and industry development.

But the airport needs to do a better job of marketing it, he added.

"The airport has fallen behind in the past in marketing it," he said. "We've been sitting down waiting for people to come to us. We need to get out and go to them."

Dugal said local marketing efforts have begun, but national marketing is needed to attract business and industry to Acadiana.

"We've got an eye on economic development," Roberts said, referring back to the undeveloped land LRA can use for expansion.

"But you have to build it before they will come," he said.