GONZALES — Gov. Edwin Edwards told about 300 people assembled for the opening ceremony of the Louisiana Regional Airport on Wednesday afternoon that he sees the new general aviation airport as a tremendous economic asset for the area.

"You don't realize how much this is going to impact the area," Edwards said after arriving by helicopter and speaking from the bed of a truck.

Edwards also touched on plans for a new international airport, which he has suggested locating in the Sorrento area.

"I was walking down the hall and someone handed me a map with Sorrento marked on it," Edwards said. "I don't know how I did that, and I don't know whose (map) it was."

When he climbed back into his helicopter, Edwards added, "I have no reason to believe a study group would consider Sorrento for an airport."

Some Baton Rouge and New Orleans officials have questioned or rejected the Sorrento site, but the Ascension-St. James Airport and Transportation Authority, the state agency that governs Louisiana Regional Airport, has gone on record supporting a Sorrento site.

Airport Authority Chairman Gerald "Nicky" Prejean said Louisiana Regional Airport will be "a tool" for economic development, "like Interstate 10 and the Mississippi River."

"I'm glad to get (the airport here). I'm tickled to death," said Harry Stafford, a pilot who gave rides in his Cessna 206 throughout the afternoon and who serves on the authority's pilot advisory committee.

Stafford's plane was one of 24 aircraft that flew in for the occasion.

Brothers Truett and David Miley, owners of Baton Rouge's AltoAir, said they may move their entire service operation to the new airfield, which is located two miles south of here near La. 44.

"Right now, there are only two airplanes based here," said Truett Miley. "It's going to be some time before this is O'Hare Airport (an international airport near Chicago, Ill.), but we don't underestimate Ascension Parish."

The Airport Authority will open bids at its meeting next month on the taxiway along the length of the 4,000-foot runway. Prejean said officials estimate the cost between $200,000 and $250,000.

Depending on the Federal Aviation Administration budget, the Airport Authority also may extend the runway another 1,000 feet next year to accommodate small corporate jets and increase the apron, which is the parking area for planes, from three acres to 10 acres.

The Airport Authority currently is offering 30 tie-down spots at no charge this year on a first-come, first-served basis.

Meanwhile, the Airport Authority may have to revise its 6-year-old master plan and airport layout in light of an FAA decision not to pay for portions of the project completed thus far, Prejean said at the authority meeting Wednesday night.

Funding is to be withheld from FAA land reimbursement funds "to allow small airports like us to have funds for capital improvements," Cutrera said.

Prejean said he prefers to complete only those projects eligible for FAA match funds first and then tackle the non-eligible items and other elements that are available from FAA.

"Had we had a construction administrator... an aviation planner... some of these things wouldn't have happened," Prejean said.

Updating the master plan may cost between $3,000 and $5,000, Prejean said.

Edwards lauds Louisiana Regional Airport as asset

By C. RICHARD COTTON and VICKI FERSTEL

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