Flight training planned for area

Facility will offer simulator for virtual learning

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When Gulf Coast helicopter pilots need simulator time to learn to fly a new aircraft, they often have to travel to Dallas or Palm Beach, Fla. But, that may change within the next year. Flight Safety International, a flight training company, is planning to build a new simulator facility in the North Park Technology Center on Port Mouton Road.

"(Lafayette is) where our customers are," said George Ferito, director of rotor craft business development for Flight Safety International in a telephone interview from his Fort Worth office. "Our customers, in this case, are offshore helicopter operators that serve the oilfield companies in the Gulf of Mexico. Few people outside the helicopter industry know this, but the area from the central coast of Mississippi to the western Gulf coast of Texas has the largest concentration of civilan helicopters in the world. There are about 800 helicopters — and it's growing daily."

Flight Safety International, a division of Berkshire Hathaway was founded in 1951, and has 43 training facilities around the world for both fixed wing aircraft and helicopters.

Advanced training without risk

The company's new 70,000 square-foot facility will house eight full simulators operating 24 hours a day. The simulators will be capable of moving in response to the pilot's controls and will duplicate a number of helicopter models. "Our simulation equipment will mirror the fleet that operates in the Gulf," Ferito said, adding that more will be added over time.

The company plans to employ between six and eight instructors per simulator, Ferito added.

The facility is not meant to train people to acquire a pilot's license, but to bring licensed pilots up to speed in unfamiliar aircraft, Ferito said.

It will also help new pilots with less flight time gain experience.

"One of the major challenges training resources face is the new wave of less experienced pilots for whom training is more critical," Ferito said.

Even newly discharged military pilots have less flight time than did their Vietnam-era counterparts.

"It's not unusual for us to see pilots coming through the training facility here with 500 hours of total flight time," Ferito said.

The new facility will make training more convenient for local helicopter companies, said Mike Suldo, president of Air Logistics.

His company owns two flight training devices, a type of simulator with instrument panels and controls, but without motion capabilities.

"For (training on) small ships, they fulfill our requirements, but for the larger ships, like the S-76, we send them to West Palm Beach."

"We can probably keep (Flight Safety's simulators) running 24 hours ourselves," Suldo said.

Full-motion simulators provide training that can't be duplicated in the air, Suldo said.

"You can simulate emergencies in a simulator you can't in an aircraft," he said. "In a big helicopter, if you want to simulate pulling off an engine, we'd be nervous to do it. But in a simulator, you can do it all day long," he said.

Lafayette considered ideal location for simulator

While Flight Safety International seems to be committed to the plan to build in Lafayette and has been working with representatives of the Lafayette Economic Development Authority, LEDA's executive director Gregg Gothreaux said nothing has been put down on paper yet. "No contract of any kind has been submitted, so I don't have any comment," he said.

Nonetheless, Ferito said his company has definite plans to go through with the deal.

"At this point, we have not signed any definitive agreement or completed purchase of the land, but the process is well under way," he said, adding that the environmental impact study has been done.

His company considered a number of cities as possible sites for the new simulator facility, including Houston and Lake Charles, but Lafayette emerged as the ideal location.

"Lafayette is the center of the offshore universe," Ferito said. "Most of our customers are within a hundred miles of Lafayette."

Other factors considered were availability of airline services, hotels and restaurants and other supporting infrastructure, Ferito said.

Groundbreaking is expected to take place in December, Ferito said, with a projected completion date of November 2008.

The simulator can also duplicate catastrophic hydraulic failure or other similar malfunctions without risking a helicopter or pilot.

"And it can bring visibility and the ceiling down. You can fly into the clouds," Suldo said.

The facility will draw pilots from around the region, Suldo said, helping the local economy, as well.

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