Officials looking to make New Iberia a regional aviation hub

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By fall 2017, New Iberia could be buzzing with aviation students — some learning to be pilots and others studying aircraft maintenance — if some south Louisiana business and education officials are successful in landing a new school on the sprawling grounds of Acadiana Regional Airport.

South Louisiana Community College Chancellor Natalie Harder said last week that the aviation school, which would be part of SLCC, would offer two-year associate degrees in aviation maintenance and pilot training.

“This could be a game-changer in south Louisiana,” Harder said.

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ABristow Academy flight training student practices maneuvers at Acadiana Regional Airport on Friday in New Iberia.

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She said the region already is an aviation hub for the oil and gas industry and commercial travel, and in Lafayette, Bell Helicopter is about to open its $26.3 million assembly plant for its Bell 505 Jet Ranger X.

Harder said the region’s growing aviation sector requires substantial aircraft maintenance. But, she said, there aren’t enough home-grown technicians to meet industry demand, which means that planes and helicopters and the components that make them fly often have to be sent out of state for repair.

SLCC is teaming up with economic development agencies, private industry and the Acadiana Regional Airport in pitching the aviation school. By November they plan to submit a request for the Legislature’s 2016 Capital Outlay program for money to build a 60,000-square-foot hangar and a classroom building.

The request has not been finalized, but a report cites capital costs of $18 million to build the facility. The report, which officials call a “white paper,” also cites estimates of an additional $1 million to $2 million to create the programs and operate the school.

Jason Devillier, director of Acadiana Regional Airport in New Iberia, said officials would submit a capital outlay request of around $20 million.

“We’re going to build the school with the ability to expand,” Devillier said.

The aviation school at the New Iberia campus would expand on SLCC’s Aviation Maintenance Technology program, which is being taught at the Lafayette Regional Airport. The program has room for 15 students and teaches the basics in aircraft maintenance.

Harder said students graduating in the program quickly find jobs.

Harder and Mike Tarantino, director of the Iberia Economic Development Foundation, last week said the new school would be modeled after the Tarrant County College’s Aviation Division in Fort Worth, Texas. The college’s Northwest Campus Center of Excellence for Aviation, Transportation and Logistics is located on the grounds of Fort Worth Alliance Airport.

Joseph McCourt, of the Tarrant County College’s aviation division, said the job market has never been better for aviation graduates. Commercial airlines, aircraft builders like Boeing and Bell, and plane maintenance businesses are trying to lure younger workers to eventually replace an aging workforce that started during the Vietnam War era.

“A lot of companies are trying to get a little more diverse as far as age group-wise and trying to have young folks who can capture some of that knowledge that the more senior people have before they leave,” McCourt said.

The Tarrant County College program has about 300 who are studying maintenance and repair. McCourt said job placement for graduates runs about 95 percent.

SLCC’s aviation school in New Iberia would model its course requirements after the those of the Fort Worth school: composites, which are blends of lightweight materials that make up much of a modern aircraft’s structure; avionics, which is the electrical system; airframe and power plant, which includes engine repair and maintenance; nondestructive testing, which uses X-ray, ultrasound and other methods to test the integrity of metals that make up the aircraft; and painting and coating.

And like Tarrant County College, SLCC also plans to start a flight school for fixed-wing and helicopter pilots at the new school. According to the white paper, it will cost $5 million to $10 million to get the pilot training program off and running. Those costs would depend on partnerships with area flight schools.

Acadiana Regional Airport Authority board members on Thursday hired Washington, D.C., lobbyist Jeff Brooks to help the airport in a federal matter unrelated to the aviation school.

But while he was at the lectern, a board member asked about the availability of federal money to help pay for the new program.

He said there were grants available to help train military veterans and disabled veterans for aviation jobs.

Brooks on Friday said the Department of Education also had discretionary funds that could be pursued.

“There’s an emphasis by the Obama administration on community colleges and job training,” Brooks said.