Upgrades take flight

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The Lafayette Regional Airport Terminal bustles with activity. Work has begun on $3 million in improvements at the facility and airport officials are in the preliminary stages of planning a terminal expansion.

Work starts on airport's $3M project

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A $3 million project now under way is the first of several improvements in store for the Lafayette Regional Airport.

Improvements to the north general aviation ramp, a new cargo apron, a reconfigured main runway and a terminal expansion are all in the works at the airport.

The projects should enhance safety and allow the airport to handle more passengers and cargo, Aviation Director Greg Roberts said.

"What will it mean to the airport? Growth," he said. "And every dollar that is spent is an investment not only to the airport, but also to Acadiana."

Lafayette Regional Airport had 102,966 passengers during the first six months of 2009, down about 3.5 percent from the previous year.

But that's not bad, considering a slumping economy has other airports across the country down double digits, Roberts said.

"We're very fortunate to have the service we do," Roberts said. "But that's because the people of Lafayette and Acadiana support their hometown airport."

Strong passenger activity recently earned the airport a $2.75 million grant from the Federal Aviation Administration. See AIRPORT on Page 8A
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The money will be used to cover improvements to north general aviation ramp used by business and private aircraft. The work, which began this week, involves removing the existing asphalt and replacing it with concrete to allow the ramp to hold heavier aircraft. The project should be completed in about a year, Roberts said.

One company that figures to benefit from the work is Odyssey Aviation. The company services up to a dozen corporate jets a day, and some are sinking into the existing asphalt ramp, general manager John Harrison said. "When the improvements are completed, they'll allow larger aircraft to come to Lafayette, which will benefit everybody," he said.

Another project that will allow the airport to handle more cargo activity is set to begin next month on a dirt field near U.S. Route 90. Once it is covered with concrete, the 17-acre cargo apron will be capable of holding five 757 airplanes. "We don't have a problem landing airplanes. It's parking," Roberts said. "With this (cargo apron), our cargo people think this could become a much larger operation that it is today."

The airport is working to secure final funding for the project, which carries a price tag of $11 million. Construction should take about a year, Roberts said.

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By the time both cargo projects are complete, work will likely have begun on a $25 million main runway reconfiguration. The project, funded by the FAA, will shift the existing runway slightly to the south, allowing room to install safety areas at each end of the runway. The FAA requires that all commercial airports have runway safety areas where possible.

The safety areas, essentially beds of crushed concrete, are designed to stop or greatly slow an aircraft if it overshoots the runway. The main runway at Lafayette Regional Airport ends at the Vermilion River, so it must be realigned to allow room for the runway safety area to be installed.

Work is expected to begin in 2010 and take about three years to complete. Once all of the projects are completed, the airport can set its sights on expanding its terminal. The terminal now is designed to handle about 240,000 passengers per year, but the airport has had more than 220,000 passengers in previous years.

An airport committee discussed an option last year that would increase passenger capacity to 350,000 at a total cost of $31.7 million. But the project is still in the preliminary stages, Roberts said, and the scope and cost of the work has not been determined.