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Company breaks ground for aviation support facility at Spokane International Airport

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Spokane International Airport CEO Larry Krauter, left, speaks at the groundbreaking Thursday for the new Aero Centers Spokane facility, at 8135 W. Pilot Drive, which will provide hangar space and maintenance for private aviation. (Jesse Tinsley/The Spokesman-Review)

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Officials huddled in a heated tent Thursday to thrust ceremonial shovels into dirt to celebrate the groundbreaking of a new \$10 million facility on the east side of Spokane International Airport.

While the Aero Centers Spokane facility is hoping to attract private airplane owners and private business back to the big airport, the history behind what's called a "fixed-base operation" facility has its roots in the birth of aviation when barnstorming pilots used World War I surplus aircraft to travel around the country, said Larry Krauter, Spokane International Airport CEO.

"They would give sightseeing tours, flight lessons and make aerial demonstrations," Krauter said. The pilots "would set up temporary operations, many times, in farmers' properties."

Then Congress passed the Air Commerce Act in 1926, that regulated licensing and other regulations that took away the free-wheeling nature of the early pilots. It also forced them to take their aviation activities to fixed-base operations.

Krauter noted the United States has about 5,000 public airports and more than 80% of the nation's 609,000 licensed pilots fly general-aviation aircraft, not the commercial jets used for mass travel.

"The pandemic accelerated private and business flying using general-aviation aircraft," Krauter said. "Airports and communities that are preparing for growth in general aviation will be the ones that are more successful over time. Which brings us to this moment today."

Michael Scheeringa, co-founder and co-CEO of Windermere, Florida-based Aero Centers, said he and his partner, Sanjay Aggarwal, hope to continue provide a path for aviators to return to the amenities afforded by the large, regional airport.

Working with Lydig Construction, of Spokane Valley, and Coffman Engineers, of Spokane, crews are building 27,000 square feet of hangar space along with another 6,000 square feet of office space at the location at 8135 W. Pilot Drive.

"When we had the idea of coming to Spokane, it was because it was a high-growth area with new economy coming in," Scheeringa said.

Spokane County Commissioner Al French, who sits on the airport's board, noted that demand for services at the airport continue to climb.

"In 2021, the airport handled over 7,400 general-aviation operations, which was almost a 12% increase year over year from 2020," French said. "And through October of 2022, general aviation-operations were nearly 17% higher than this time last year.

"So this is a growing industry and a growing airport. In fact, the West Plains is the fastest growing light industrial area in the state of Washington," he continued. "Think about that."

Spokane City Council President Breean Beggs, who also sits on the airport board, noted that the groundbreaking on Thursday was the third such event in the past few months.

“What happened to the sleepy Spokane airport that we all grew up with?” Beggs said. “It is changing the world and we are on fire.”

He thanked Scheeringa and Aggarwal for choosing to bring the facility to Spokane.

“Clearly you are innovative and smart, because you came here to Spokane,” Beggs said. “I would like to say Spokane is in play, and it truly is across all sectors. And if you look at the data and the trends of what is going on, it is the future of our region.”

Jeremy Epperson, the president and chief operating officer for Aero Centers, said the company expects to provide about 20 jobs and it wants its local managers to be from the community they serve.

Aero Centers has similar fixed-base operation facilities in Lakeland and Tallahassee, Florida; Wilmington, North Carolina, and Casper, Wyoming. The company hopes to open the Spokane facility around Labor Day 2023.

Scheeringa said within weeks of opening the Wilmington facility, it had so many airplane owners seeking space that it reached 140% capacity.

“We’ve committed to building two new hangars on top of that,” he said of the Wilmington facility.

He also noted that the airport board has approved the potential for Aero Centers to expand to an adjacent parcel on West Pilot Drive.

“We are hoping not only for two hangars, but that there will be a third hangar to come,” he said.

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