

East Valley airport takes a flight to the future

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For years, former air traffic controller Ron Pierce stood in the tower at the former Williams Air Force Base with a birds-eye view of a consultant's master plan taking shape, seemingly at jet speed.

"It was like a vision coming to life," he said, referring to the changes since the airfield decommissioned in 1993 and went into the hands of five Valley communities.

"We always considered s [Gateway](#) Airport to be a living entity."

Now, the changes could come at Mach 1.

Newly christened Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport, the historic airfield is expected to develop as a reliever for up to 1.2 million annual passengers, a burgeoning international cargo hub and a higher education center producing highly skilled employees for nearby aerospace companies.

Major companies such as Boeing, Cessna and Embraer are expanding and building there as well. Smaller companies include hangar and office-building developer, Himovitz Properties, Inc; Silver State Helicopters, LLC and International Simulations and Training Systems, which provides simulator [research and development](#). Arizona State University/Polytechnic, which acquired part of the old Air Force base property for a campus, is projecting an enrollment of 10,000 in 2008.

Jim Harris, a principal of Coffman Associates, an airport consulting firm with clients across the country, said market forces such as surging oil prices or an economic recession could slow the airport's explosive development, but that would have a short-term effect.

"The one thing about Gateway that is most is important," he said, "is that they never put their eggs in one basket. They have diversified well and have been very nimble in adjusting to opportunities."

Mike Pearson, aviation law and management professor at Arizona State University/Polytechnic and an air traffic controller at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport, said, "In ten more years we'll barely recognize this airport," he said.

A military legacy

In 14 years, the airport has shed its military profile and taken on an updated look of new office buildings, hangars, warehouses and taxiways. The airport's \$3 million 24,000-square-foot

terminal, which was completed in 2001 before the events of Sept. 11 turned the commercial aviation industry upside down, opened in April 2006 for the airport's first scheduled airline passengers. Architects soon will begin planning the terminal's expansion.

Developers and airport officials say that much of the 3,000-plus acre airport will continue to be a construction zone over the next decade as private [enterprise](#), including aviation giants Cessna and Embraer, and Arizona State University/Polytechnic and Chandler Gilbert Community College expand and build new facilities.

"Cessna and Embraer's decisions to build major maintenance facilities at the airport are certainly indicative of how they feel about the Phoenix metro area and the airport as a key component of their future plans," Harris said.

A project developed by developed by Valley business, government and public entities, is under way to establish the airport as a world-class cargo hub. Called Arizona Direct, the project also seeks to provide direct rail access and establish regional truck service, aerospace research and development and manufacturing.

Investment in infrastructure is expected to be key to future development.

Airport reliever

Barclay Dick, director of the Arizona Department of Transportation's Aeronautics Division, said the airport's emergence as a reliever to serve smaller cities and secondary airports instead of wooing major carriers like U.S. Airways appears to bode well for Gateway.

With forecasts of passenger traffic continuing to climb and congestion delaying flights at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport, Dick said Gateway could grow into its role as a major reliever more rapidly than many expect.

"Sky Harbor, unfortunately, is pretty compact. It doesn't have a lot of room for growth unless the city starts spending huge amounts of money and that would be a dollar figure that would stagger all of us. So the additional air service the Valley needs can be accommodated at Gateway."

That should get its biggest boost yet on Oct. 25, said Harris, when Allegiant Air launches low-cost passenger operations that will serve 13 markets by Nov. 21. Phoenix-Mesa will be the fourth base for the airlines, which already provides scheduled service to more than 50 cities across the nation.

Dick said Phoenix, as a member of Gateway's governing board, is in a position to encourage smaller passenger carriers that Sky Harbor can't handle to try Gateway.

"As long as major carriers can meet their demand at Sky Harbor that's what they're going to do," he said. "It's expensive for airlines to set up another station, ticket counters and baggage claim at another airport. That's why the new guys in the market are going to Gateway."

"If the city of Phoenix had taken the position that Gateway was poised to be a competitor rather than a compliment, " he said, "it would have been difficult for everybody."

\$1 billion investment

Harris said demands for development at the Mesa-based airport have become so large that finding money to build its supporting infrastructure will be daunting, Harris said.

"A lot of planning needs to be done of up front to make sure finances are there to build that infrastructure," he said.

The price tag for those roads, utilities and other municipal services is likely to exceed \$1 billion, according to unofficial estimates cited by Roc Arnett, president of the East Valley Partnership, a coalition of business, government and education entities.

Loop 202, which bends from the north to the west at the airport's northern doorstep, will be the airport's major connection for the next several years, say Valley transportation officials. Bus service and light rail have not entered serious dialogue about the airport's transportation links.

Growing costs are among reasons that Mesa and airport officials would like to accelerate construction of the Williams Gateway Freeway to link the airport area to Pinal County.

"With the development out there it became critical to seek earlier construction of the freeway and improve Power Road for another better access point into the airport," said Mesa Transportation Director, Jeff Martin. "We'd like to accelerate the first mile of the freeway about four years."

The widening of Power Road to relieve congestion along the airport's western border begins this month and should continue for the next two years.

But plans for the freeway project are still on the drawing boards with a projected completion date of 2020.