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Marana airport growth plans taking off

By Aaron Mackey

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When Tucsonan Arsenio Delgado wants to take flying lessons at a local airport, he gets in his car and drives to Marana.

Delgado, who works as a nurse at the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System, would rather use Marana Regional Airport for his flight lessons than go to Tucson International Airport.

Even though he lives in Midtown and works near TIA, Delgado said Marana's airport offers a less expensive and less stressful alternative to the hustle and bustle of commercial flights at TIA.

"It's a lot more efficient" in Marana, said Delgado, a pilot who's training for his commercial and instructor's licenses. "We can take our time and be more relaxed."

While TIA officials maintain that private aircraft and flight training will always be welcome at the region's largest airport, pilots such as Delgado are choosing to fly out of smaller airports such as Marana's and Ryan Airfield on the Southwest Side.

Town officials say they're ready for the new business.

They plan to pump roughly \$70.5 million in grants into Marana Regional Airport, 11700 W. Avra Valley Road, over the next 20 years to help meet the needs of a growing private and corporate flying industry. The town would contribute an additional \$4 million.

Some of those improvements include a terminal and hangars dedicated to corporate aircraft and the construction of another runway for flight training.

Crews last week began paving what will become the corporate terminal's apron, or large parking lot for planes.

The airport's manager hopes to have the paving completed in time for this month's Accenture World Match Play Championship, which pits the world's top 64 golfers against each other in a single-elimination tournament.

The airport will see heavy traffic as golfers, corporate sponsors and private pilots land in Marana

to have easy access to the tournament, which will be played at The Gallery Golf Club at Dove Mountain.

With the exposure and planned improvements, town officials hope they can lure more private pilots, corporate jets and aerospace industries to an airport that brings in roughly \$19 million to the community each year, according to town figures.

"As TIA continues to grow, pilots know that there are other locations in the region," said Charles Mangum, the airport's director. "We're hoping that they land here."

When the town bought the airport from Pima County in 1999 it was in disrepair, Mangum said.

The runways and taxiways needed to be resurfaced. The airport's lights and security fences needed to be replaced.

Using \$18 million in federal and state grants, officials began fixing the airport. Crews this year are busy installing sewer and water lines that will form the backbone of future development at the airport.

With the pipes in place, Mangum's vision for the airport is slowly taking shape.

Corporate visitors and chartered flights will soon be able to get off their jets at a designated terminal that will have its own entrance from Avra Valley Road.

Rental cars will be standing by to take travelers into the region for business, while nearby hangars will house repair and specialty shops for the aircraft. Pilots will be able to refuel without leaving the terminal.

The airport currently provides those services, but the airport's growth — the town estimates that traffic will double in the next 20 years — dictates that a dedicated corporate terminal be built and separated from private flights and training, Mangum said.

The terminal, featuring a restaurant and community rooms, could be finished in about three years.

The town recently was approved by the FAA to begin planning for a control tower. The tower could be completed in five to seven years, Mangum said.

Other improvements include extending the airport's two runways and building more taxiways.

Eventually, plans call for a third runway to be built that would be dedicated to general aviation, which includes flight training and private pilots.

It's tough to predict when the runway would be built because it depends on the airport's demand, Mangum said.

In fact, all the projects and improvements to Marana's airport — and the federal and state grant money that funds them — are based on the airport's use.

"When the demand's here, that's when we start building," Mangum said.

If growth exceeds predictions, the third runway could be in place by 2018. Construction would also entail realigning Avra Valley Road to make way for the runway and hangars.

TIA's flight line director, Scott Driver, knows that the days of small aircraft and private flying at the airport are numbered.

"It's fair to say that the end's in sight," he said. "It's just a matter of time."

As more commercial airlines fill the sky around TIA and freight planes take up hangar space, small private planes are having a harder time taking off and landing.

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