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Plane builder to land in East Valley

By Sarah Lynch
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An artist's rendering shows the large jet repair facility at Williams Gateway Airport proposed by the Cessna Aircraft Company. SUBMITTED

Cessna Aircraft Company announced plans Monday to break ground on a large jet repair facility at Williams Gateway Airport, a move that will let the East Valley economy reap the benefits of higher-paying jobs, tourism and a slight boost to Mesa sales tax revenue. Cessna, a Textron Inc. company, plans to shut down its Citation Service Center in Long Beach, Calif., and relocate to Williams. But the new 100,000-square-foot facility will be twice the size of the existing one.

The repair facility will be located on a 15-acre tract of land, and it will be the first building people see when they turn into the airport on Sossaman Road.

The repair center will serve as a regional hub for the owners of Cessna's executive Citation jets, and it will draw aviators from all over the Southwest who need to fly in for repairs.

The Citation jets cost between \$4.5 million and \$21 million each, and require regular maintenance.

Mark Paolucci, Cessna's senior vice president for customer service, said Arizona is a good fit for the new center because it has become a destination for many of Cessna's customers.

"We find our service facilities located in an area where our customers are going to be more successful than those tucked away nice and neatly in a quiet little neighborhood," he said.

"With Phoenix being a major destination for a lot of our customers, Mesa was really a good fit from that perspective."

Williams Gateway lies at the junction of Mesa, Queen Creek and Gilbert. Those three cities, along with the Gila River Indian Community and Phoenix, make up the airport's governing authority.

The new facility will complete yet another piece of what is expected to be a future East Valley job center in the vicinity of Williams Gateway. City officials said they are excited about the boost it will bring to the cash-strapped city.

The Cessna center is expected to be fully operational by 2009, and it will create about 100 jobs that pay between \$25 to \$27 per hour. Over time, that number may increase to over 150 jobs, Paolucci said.

In addition, the Chandler-Gilbert Community College on site at Williams Gateway offers an airplane mechanic program, and the students who graduate from there will be able to seek employment from Cessna, said Harold Decker, a Mesa senior economic development specialist.

Cessna is also likely to help boost tourism in the city because the people who fly in for repair work will need a place to stay. Every three years, Citation jets require two weeks worth of maintenance. In the remaining two years, they need repairs that can take between two and three days.

Cessna hopes to have about 2,000 maintenance visits to Williams Gateway after the center has been open a full year, Paolucci said. That means there could be between 30 to 50 jets on site any given day.

Decker said he hopes Cessna's decision to locate in Mesa will spur the development of high-end hotels.

"It will be business people looking to stay in a hotel and they are all very well-to-do people, so they expect to stay in nice hotel facilities," Decker said.

Casey Denny, the deputy director of Williams Gateway, said the airport already has set aside some land near the golf course that can be used for a hotel, and airport officials are in talks with about six or seven companies that have expressed interest in locating a business-class hotel either on airport property or in the vicinity of the airport.

Denny said it's "highly likely" there will be at least one hotel in the area by 2009 - the year Cessna plans to open its facility.

In addition, city officials said the Cessna site will generate some sales tax revenue for the city from the sale of airplane parts, although Mayor Keno Hawker said the additional sales tax will be a secondary benefit.

"I would not say it's a huge sales tax impact," he said. "There will be some because those parts are expensive."

The company's plans to open a center in Mesa have been under way for years. In January 2004, the company signed a lease agreement with Williams Gateway to build the facility. But even before that, airport officials were trying to encourage Cessna to make the move to Mesa. The first time the airport made a pitch to the company was at an International Trade Show in 1999, Denny said.

"Cessna is a world-renowned aviation company," Denny said. "We felt that their product would fit well for this airport (and) we felt that they could do well by locating a service center in this region."

Based on unit sales, Cessna is the world's largest manufacturer of general aviation airplanes. In 2005, the company delivered 1,157 aircraft and reported revenue of about \$3.5 billion.

"This is huge," Hawker said. "Cessna has a great reputation and name. It's the perfect match with the education institutions, with the training, and they will be taking advantage of the runway and infrastructure that has been built."

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