

East Valley

Taking off: Area leaders hopeful Mesa airport improvements will spur economic development

The Business Journal of Phoenix - August 17, 2007 by [Linda Obele](#) Contributing writer

East Valley leaders are banking on increased passenger service and next month's vote on a new airport name to propel economic development around Mesa's Williams Gateway Airport to greater heights.

"Having regularly scheduled passenger service is another feather in our cap to promote and market the land development side," said airport spokesman Brian Sexton, referring to Las Vegas-based Allegiant Air's plans to begin flying in October from Williams Gateway to 13 new destinations.

The airline announced its first two destinations this month: Rockford, in the Chicago area, and Rapid City, S.D. Other routes will be revealed by mid-September.

Sexton said while the carrier's plans still are too fresh to determine their overall impact, he is confident the phone soon will be ringing with other carriers that want to get in on the action, as well as new developers that want to build in and around the airport.

Vision Air, an established charter carrier, has been offering scheduled service to and from Las Vegas since April 2006. Officials recently said Vision intends to launch service to Long Beach, Calif., by year-end.

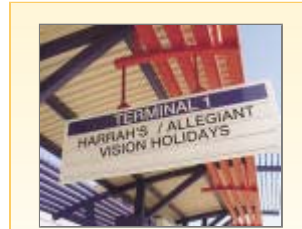
"It's like back in high school," Sexton said. "Everyone wants to hang out with the cool kids."

He said the airport saw a similar phenomenon occur on the development side when Boeing Co. announced plans to expand its helicopter operations at Williams Gateway. Cessna followed suit, breaking ground in April on a 100,000-square-foot Citation service center. Cessna plans to relocate employees and tooling from its Long Beach, Calif., site once the new center opens in early 2009.

Meanwhile, Embraer, a Brazilian maker of executive jets and the world's third-largest commercial aircraft manufacturer, began construction in July on a 45,000-square-foot maintenance center dedicated to full-service care for the company's Phenom 100, Phenom 300 and Legacy 600 aircraft. The \$8 million facility, scheduled for completion in 2008, includes hangar, workshop and office space.

According to a September 2006 report by the Urban Land Institute, the Williams Gateway area is ripe for all kinds of development. The area encompasses 42 square miles, including the converted Williams Air Force Base, Mesa, Gilbert, Queen Creek, the General Motors Proving Grounds, part of the Gila River Indian Community, and some Maricopa County islands.

In the next 25 years, ULI panelists predicted a need in that area for development of 1,575 acres of industrial land, 400 acres of office space, 500 acres of retail space, 5,200 hotel rooms and seven



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Vision Air, a charter carrier, offers flights to Las Vegas via Williams Gateway Airport. The airline also plans to launch service to Long Beach, Calif., by the end of the year.

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golf courses. The panel also estimated the population of the area could reach 165,000 and that more than 68,000 students will attend local institutes of higher learning, including Arizona State University's Polytechnic campus, located in the heart of the study area.

The airport has construction projects under way now on 200 of its 1,000 developable acres, including a new parking lot, taxiway and other enhancements to support growth of the state's third-busiest airport, Sexton said.

East Valley Partnership Executive Director Roc Arnett said development plans are brewing from a number of different angles outside the airport boundaries, too.

DMB Associates Inc. plans to build on 3,200 acres of the GM Proving Grounds at Elliot and Ellsworth roads, which the company purchased from General Motors last year. Real estate developer Bill Levine owns the property's remaining 1,700 acres and is planning to build a mixed-use project.

Paragon Properties is marketing 950 acres near Ellsworth and Pecos roads, and First Industrial Realty Trust purchased 291 acres at Elliot and Ellsworth roads for \$41.5 million last year, with plans to develop a 3 million-square-foot business park with office, industrial and retail space.

Arnett said the ULI report encouraged the Williams Gateway Airport Authority to explore potential development strategies for the area including industrial facilities, a passenger terminal, a cargo facility, education facilities, mixed-use development, golf courses and a resort. He also said the panelists recommended pursuing development of medical facilities to support the East Valley's aging population.

Sexton said an interim passenger terminal at the airport is scheduled to be replaced in 2012 with a permanent facility, but that timeline might have to be accelerated depending on the need.

Regarding the name change to Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport, which is expected to occur at the WGAA board meeting next month, Arnett and Sexton agreed it will be another step in marketing the area to a larger audience.

Sexton said the name change is a contingency of the airport's agreement with Allegiant Air.

Said Arnett, "We've been told by people in the airport business that destinations away from here have no clue where Williams Gateway Airport is. The name doesn't speak to who or where we are. The change will be nothing but a plus. It will allow us to market ourselves appropriately across the country."

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Williams Gateway Airport: www.flywga.com