

## Southeast Valley becoming aerospace business hub

by **Art Thomason** - Jun. 2, 2009 12:00 AM

The Arizona Republic

With a multibillion-dollar economic impact, the aerospace industry is the southeast Valley's payroll leader, one of the region's largest employers and a workplace for some of Arizona's top research talent.

Collectively, Chandler, Gilbert, Mesa and Tempe are home to more than 200 private firms, a state university, community college and an Air Force lab, all of which are engaged in a range of aerospace manufacturing and research, from helicopter assembly to space technology.

In March, a group of influential business, government and academic leaders warned that Arizona's \$3.8 billion annual aerospace payroll could dwindle unless determined efforts are made to expand the industry by supplying the science and engineering talent it demands

"I'm jazzed about this group's proposal for creation of an aerospace think tank," said John Schroeder, provost of Chandler-Gilbert Community College's Williams campus in southeast Mesa. "We've got to look at the space side of the aerospace equation, which tends to exist very quietly here. It's a really big deal."

Here is a city-by-city breakdown of the impact of aerospace:

**GILBERT:** Space exploration and science make a strong showing in Gilbert, where aerospace employs 9 percent of the town's total workforce, or 4,200 residents.

More than 200 companies in the town of 215,000 are engaged in aerospace, defense and the supply chains related to those industries, officials said.

Gilbert's eastern boundary adjoins Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport in Mesa, where aerospace development is a priority.

**MESA:** The biggest aerospace players in Mesa are situated at and around Falcon Field Airport near the city's northeastern corner, helping generate an annual economic impact in excess of \$2.1 billion.

Though Mesa received national attention last year for its aerospace development, activity in recent months has been sluggish, a downturn tied in part to the nation's economic crisis.

**TEMPE:** "Critical" is the word Sheri Wakefield-Saenz uses to describe the aerospace industry's relationship to Tempe's economy.

The city's economic-development director said the industry is a primary employer and creates jobs in the supplier networks.

"The Arizona State University aerospace-engineering program is one of the top state university programs in the country and provides a base of employment for aerospace companies in the metro region," she said.

**CHANDLER:** Christine Mackay, Chandler's economic development director, said aerospace is a key component of the city's economic base.

"Not only are there great-quality, higher-wage jobs, but the industry is significant in the amount of research and development it brings into any community," she said. "The industry is always evolving and changing, always looking for the next and best in innovative design and technology. The industry creates new opportunities on an ongoing basis."

**Reporters Luci Scott and Katherine Greene contributed to this article.**