

Cover Story



Photo by Al Key

A new hangar is under construction at Denton Airport on Feb. 6.

Airport activity still flying high

By Candace Carlisle

The economy might be taking a nose dive, but business at Denton Airport continues to soar.

Businesses throughout the airport — a flight school, fueling services and airplane maintenance shops — have all shown growth, said Mark Nelson, the city's transportation director.

Denton Airport is designated as a "super-reliever" for Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, helping to relieve air traffic from D/FW.

Last year, Denton saw more than 127,000 takeoffs and land-

ings, a number that has doubled in less than four years, Nelson said.

The dramatic increase in flight activity is due in part to international students flocking to the area for flight school, he said.

And increased business is likely to continue for the airport, which the city of Denton estimates will have an estimated \$58.4 million total economic impact.

There are about 20 companies and 230 aircraft at the airport, including Business Air, Jet Works, U.S. Aviation Group, Piaggio and Aircraft Precision Maintenance.

The city's new 4,600-square-foot terminal building — a \$1.36 million investment — opened last year to help alleviate growing pains.

New additions will likely continue at the airport as the city

invests in additional security fencing and a possible second runway per the airport's master plan outlined in 2003, Nelson said.

Following the completion of a \$3.8 million taxiway realignment, the airport will start work on the runway later this year, extending it 7,000 feet to accommodate larger planes and bring more business to the area, Nelson said.

Plans for further development at the airport rely in part on funds received from three gas well sites, and "we're not sure how long these gas wells will operate," he said.

But gas well operations seem

to mirror the airport growth, as drilling started last month at a fourth site.

That is a trend private business at the airport is following.

Jet Works, an aircraft maintenance business, has a hangar addition that is scheduled for completion April 1, said Garth Shipley, director of finance and accounting for the company.

The hangar project will cost about \$4.4 million and will significantly increase the capabilities of the company, which has been operating at capacity, Shipley said.

"We are full," he said. "We

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could use the space right now if we had it available.”

The new hangar gives the company the ability to accept larger planes that can fly from farther away, leading to additional growth, he said.

“We’ve probably grown 10 to 15 percent last year,” Shipley said. “For this year, for the economy, we’ve positioned ourselves for a flat year, but we’re up. We’re busy. [The hangar] won’t be ready soon enough for us.”

Some areas of the aviation business have been soft as corporate aircraft stay grounded as companies try to conserve cash, leading to a lag time between scheduled aircraft maintenance, he said.

But Jet Works has yet to feel the impact.

“It hasn’t done it to us — knock on wood — but I know there are competitors that are feeling some pains,” Shipley said. “Some have shut down their maintenance completely, and others have scaled back.”

Larger airports have reported a sharp drop-off in scheduled maintenance, he said, but Jet Works has continued to grow.

“We treat the customer right, so the next time maintenance or refurbishing needs come up, we are the first name they think of,” Shipley said. “It all boils down to the value of giving our customers a quality service for a reasonable price. It’s all relationship-driven.”

With those relationships, Jet Works anticipates adding 25 employees to its work force of 100 when the new hangar’s operations begin, Shipley said.

“Denton is not the hotbed for aviation, but we are slowly trying to create a reputation for ourselves in aviation,” Shipley said. “People will look at us and come out to see what we’re doing. We’re trying to create something special out here, and I think we’re doing a good job at it.”

Another business at the airport — U.S. Aviation — also has shown growth over the last few years.

Last month, U.S. Aviation was approved by the city to sell aircraft fuel, making it the second company with the ability to serve up fuel, joining Business Air.

Along with the fuel service,



Photo by Al Key

A helicopter flies past the control tower at Denton Airport on Feb. 6.

U.S. Aviation will have hangar services and a pilots lounge — to go with its pre-existing flight school and maintenance facility — that will likely open about February 2010, said Mark Taylor, vice president of marketing and business development.

“I see that this will be positive for the entire airport; it will give [the airport] more status,” Taylor said. “Anytime you can get into a competitive environment, you’re better off.”

U.S. Aviation has about 200 full- and part-time flight students, 50 full- and part-time

employees, 34 airplanes and one helicopter.

Those numbers will continue to rise rapidly, Taylor said. “In the last three years, we have doubled our business every year, and we expect to do that in 2009.”

Three years ago, U.S. Aviation bought out the U.S. Flight Academy. Now, the flight school portion of the business — a Federal Aviation Administration-certified Part 141 operation — accounts for about 30 percent of U.S. Aviation’s business model, he

said.

U.S. Aviation has increased its fleet size to accommodate the flight school’s 200 students, with plans for another 100 students by the end of the year, Taylor said.

International students — many from universities and airline companies in China and India — spend a year getting their flight certification, Taylor said.

Along with learning how to fly, they have about a month to grasp enough English to know flight equipment acronyms and

talk to flight trainers, he said.

U.S. Aviation also has plans to partner with the University of North Texas on an aviation management program that is set to take flight for the fall semester, Taylor said.

By partnering with UNT, the business and airport could potentially gain a whole new customer base, he said.

Students would have the opportunity to pay for flight instruction with financial aid money through the university,

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he said.

“A lot of people drive down Interstate 35 and they don’t put 2 and 2 together that there is an airport here,” Taylor said. “We want to get our name out there and promote the airport.”

For Business Air, fuel sales have been holding steady, said Phil Jordan, an owner and executive vice president.

“We hope [business] continues to grow, but we are in a flat area right now,” Jordan said. “When the economy gets depressed, sales go flat, decreasing our business.”

The company also stores about 40 to 50 airplanes, and Jordan said he’s noticed several people around the airport selling their corporate and private jets.

The trend will likely continue for Business Air — a 30-employee firm with ties to Jet Works and Odyssey Aviation — when it begins competing against former customer U.S. Aviation for airport fuel sales, Jordan said.

“I think it could hurt, but I don’t expect for it to impact too much,” Jordan said. “We’ve known they’ve been working on it for years. We’ve never been concerned that someone could offer a lower price; we’re not out to compete on price.”

CANDACE CARLISLE can



Photo by Gary Payne

U.S. Aviation Group mechanic Joshua Smith moves a Cessna 152 after working on it at the Denton Airport on Jan. 7.



File photo by Al Key

Stunt pilot John MacGuire practices his routine over Denton Airport in preparation for the Denton Air Fair as an American Airlines passenger jet makes its approach to D/FW Airport on June 13.

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