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www.airportmagazine.net | April/May 2009

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Greenfield Airport

Prepares for Take-off Thanks to Innovative Approach to Permitting

By Randy Curtis, A.A.E.

Airport Magazine is pleased to present the second in a series of reports by Panama City-Bay County (Fla.) International Airport Executive Director Randy Curtis, A.A.E., that chronicle the process of relocating the airport to a new site 12 miles away. The new location was donated by the St. Joe Company, Bay County's largest private landowner. For the background on the airport and the reasons for relocating it, see "Panama City Airport Relocation Diary," beginning on page 56 in the August/September 2008 issue of Airport Magazine. In this second report, Curtis discusses the permitting process.

Development of the new Panama City-Bay County International Airport in northwest Florida is moving along at a brisk pace. Construction of the airport's 10,000-foot runway is nearly three months ahead of schedule, the terminal building and other vertical structures are underway, and the nation's newest and "greenest" international airport is on track to open in May 2010.

It hasn't always been such smooth flying. There have been challenges to the new airport, but by using innovative approaches to the permitting processes, the Panama City-Bay County International Airport Authority has been able to successfully clear the hurdles inherent in building a new airport.

The new airport site is the

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Site development for the airfield and the terminal are underway.

centerpiece of the 74,000-acre West Bay Sector Plan, one of the largest mixed-use developments in the U.S. The West Bay plan includes an industrial district, low-impact residential communities, and retail and business centers.

A primary feature of the West Bay plan — and what really sets this project apart from others — is that 41,000 acres, or about 60 square miles around West Bay, including 33 miles of undeveloped shoreline and an additional 44 miles of creeks and tributaries that feed the bay, will be protected forever. In addition, the sector plan creates conservation buffers, some as wide as 1,000 feet, along the rivers and creeks that feed into the bay. This is more than 30 times the amount required by law.

To help protect the environment, future development around the airport will be clustered. Instead of piecemeal development of small, scattered land parcels to meet the state requirements to mitigate all of the proposed developments, the sector plan calls for huge areas of conservation lands. This will protect watersheds that feed into the St. Andrews Bay.

Dominated by pine flatwoods and wetlands, the

conservation land is home to endangered species and vegetation such as the Snowy Egret, Blue Heron, Florida Black Bear, Gopher Tortoise and Pitcher Plant. This unique conservation approach effectively helps with land management and preserves entire ecosystems rather than bits and pieces.

The airport authority also set a goal of increasing wetlands quality by enhancing the mitigation area to well above the capacity of the current wetlands and by providing mitigation far in advance of potential impacts.

Further, the airport authority has pro-actively committed to following “Outstanding” Florida water standards for stormwater, the highest standard in the state, even though it is not required. Two years of intensive baseline water quality data have been collected for Burnt Mill Creek, Crooked Creek and West Bay for use in ongoing water quality monitoring.

The planning and design of the airport site also has been targeted at ensuring that the facility will have the least impact possible on the surrounding environment. The airport will have minimal impact on the surrounding

“Use of ecosystem team permitting streamlined the process and produced a net benefit for the environment. It also provided for better public involvement.”

wetlands and creeks. A specially designed stormwater system captures water on-site and filters it through a series of holding ponds before releasing it into nearby creeks and wetlands. Most of the materials used in the construction of the airport's runway come from nearby sources, thereby substantially reducing transportation requirements.

The airport itself will have the first Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)-certified terminal building in the nation, with a state-of-the-art stormwater management system, extensive use of sustainable materials and a landscaping plan that will not require supplemental irrigation.

Florida's innovative sector planning process enabled the airport to be located within a massive master planned community. Working with a 74,000-acre greenfield site, Bay County, in cooperation with the state, was able to undertake the type of long-range planning most communities cannot. With public involvement every step of the way, the West Bay Sector Plan overlay mapped out industrial, commercial and residential developments, as well as such infrastructure as roads, electric lines and water and sewer. It gave the local community and planning officials at the state level a view of what the area will look like 50 to 100 years from now.

The sector plan overlay was just one step in the permitting process. Within the sector plan are two Detailed Specific Area Plans (DSAP), which sketch out the planning in much more detail. One DSAP is for the airport and the other is for the St. Joe Company's commercial and residential developments, located west of the airport. The DSAPs

were approved by the Bay County Commission in December 2003.

For the development of the airport, various state and federal permits had to be obtained. Again, as with the overall planning process, the airport authority took a different approach toward pursuing its environmental permits.

Ecosystem Team

Typically, the airport authority would have worked with each of the regulatory agencies separately as it sought permits. But the authority opted to use the state's new ecosystem team permitting process, which allowed the permits to be pursued simultaneously in a controlled and coordinated manner.

As part of this process, the airport authority and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, operating under a memorandum of understanding, formed what became known as the small circle committee.

The inner circle, or the core group, included the airport authority and the two primary regulatory agencies that had to approve the project: FAA and the Army Corps of Engineers. The middle circle included other agencies such as Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Florida Department of Community Affairs and Bay County. The outer circle included the environmental advocacy groups and the general public.

As the process moved forward, monthly meetings open to the public were held to work through the details and technical aspects of the permitting process.

Use of ecosystem team permitting streamlined the process and produced a net benefit for the environment. It also provided for



better public involvement. As a result, the airport authority was able to protect and enhance the St. Andrews Bay ecosystem and tributaries and mitigate stormwater runoff. The airport authority agreed to mitigate for the entire 4,000-acre site now, even though only 1,300 acres are being developed initially.

FAA approved the airport's environmental impact statement and issued a final record of decision in May 2006. The Army Corps issued its permit in August 2007. Both permits were challenged in federal court. Construction of the airport was able to begin in January 2008, while the legal challenges moved forward in federal courts in New York, Atlanta and Jacksonville. The challenge to the Army Corps permit was dismissed late last year. A final ruling in the FAA challenge is expected at any time.

Seven court rulings to date have upheld the position to build the new Panama City-Bay County International Airport, which has allowed construction to proceed.

The airport authority's ability to overcome the legal challenges and allow the construction of the airport to proceed was the result of actions taken early in the permitting process. More than 100 public meetings were held, and alliances were formed with environmental groups such as the Audubon Society, whose officials understood the positive impact the sector plan had on protecting St. Andrews Bay.

The lessons learned from this experience? Do it right from the beginning. Don't cut corners. Listen to opponents, treat them fairly and respond to their concerns. It may require a lot more effort, but the end result will be much more positive. 