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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Nurturing eco-friendly communities



America's Greenest Airport

The construction of a 4,000-acre airport has led to the protection of 41,000 environmentally sensitive acres.

CAN AN AIRPORT be good for the environment?

The relocated Panama City–Bay County International Airport may be the first such facility in the United States to be so.

The new airport, currently fully under construction and on schedule to open for service in May 2010, has been designed with an eye toward claiming the unofficial title of “America’s greenest airport.”

The project earned support and was planned with help from a number of Florida’s most progressive environmental organizations, developers, and local, state, and federal agencies. As a result of the relocation, 41,000 environmentally sensitive acres (16,600 ha), including 33 miles (53 km) of West Bay shoreline and 44 miles (70 km) of creek and tributaries, will be protected forever.

The airport itself aims to have the first LEED-certified terminal building in the United States, with a state-of-the-art stormwater management system, extensive use of sustainable materials, and a landscaping

plan that will not require supplemental irrigation.

The project, now taking root on the site of a former industrial pine plantation, was more than a decade in the making. Like any major infrastructure project, it faced much skepticism and more than a little opposition.

Panama City’s Need for Better Air Service

More than 20 years ago, the Panama City–Bay County Airport and Industrial District began discussing options to ensure its airport could continue growing to effectively serve the region’s needs.

The existing airport had a number of serious deficiencies. Most significantly, the airport’s two runways did not meet federal safety standards—both had deficient runway safety areas (RSAs). Plus, the airport’s primary runway was one of the shortest in the state of Florida, and unable to support unconstrained operations.

The airport authority began studying options for lengthening the primary runway and establishing

standard-sized RSAs. The authority commissioned a federally required environmental assessment study of extending the runway into St. Andrew Bay. The plan called for adding 1,200 feet (366 m) of runway, bringing the total length to 7,500 feet (2,286 m).

Not surprisingly, the project drew fire from environmentalists who protested the runway extension’s impact on the bay. Upon review, it became apparent that the runway extension would cause significant damage to state Class II protected waters. Subsequently, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection declared that extending into the bay would never be approved. A subsequent plan to extend the runway across a major thoroughfare and into an existing residential community was also shelved.

Relocation Concept Takes Shape

Instead, the airport authority reached out to the St. Joe Company, one of the state’s largest private landowners, to develop a plan to relocate the

Building 1 of the new Panama City–Bay County International Airport.





Paving and site development as of October 2008.



Overlay map of West Bay Area Sector Plan. The site of the new airport is shown in gray.

outlets and hotels will be clustered. And the area east of the airport is designated for office buildings. By design, residential housing will not be clustered near the airport.

To help protect the environment, future development around the airport will be grouped rather than scattered on small land parcels. The sector plan calls for huge areas of conservation lands, so as to protect watersheds that feed into the St. Andrew Bay.

The sector plan creates more than 30 times the amount of conservation buffers required by law along the rivers and creeks that feed into the bay—some as wide as 1,000 feet (305 m). Dominated by pine flatwoods and wetlands, the conservation land is home to listed species such as the snowy egret, blue heron, Florida black bear, gopher tortoise, and pitcher plant. This conservation approach better helps with land management and preserves entire ecosystems rather than bits and pieces.

Another component of the preservation plan is the establishment of an Audubon Nature Center that will provide educational programs, help manage mitigation and restoration efforts, and serve as a public gateway for low-impact activities on portions of the preservation lands.

The fact that the construction of a 4,000-acre (1,619-ha) airport has led to the protection of such a large conservation area is difficult for many to fully comprehend. But the process by which the airport came to be may serve as a national model for effective public/private partnerships designed to achieve the best results for the economy and the environment.

Building America's First Green Airport

In remarks delivered at the airport's ground breaking on November 1, 2007, Florida Governor Charlie Crist said, "When considered as a whole, this is America's first truly 'green airport.'"

The new conservation land is not the only environmental benefit

airport to a more appropriate unconstrained site. It was this decision that led to a surprising outcome—the protection of tens of thousands of acres of environmentally sensitive land, including nearly the entire shoreline of West Bay.

Bob Francis, an aviation consultant and former vice chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, says, "It's almost unprecedented. I can't think of another new airport built with the support of a substantial number of environmental groups."

The new Panama City-Bay County International Airport will occupy 4,000 acres (1,619 ha) that the St. Joe Company donated in 2007. Initial development is on just 1,300 acres (526 ha), leaving a significant amount of land for future airport needs and inside-the-fence development.

As part of the 75,000-acre (30,364-ha) West Bay Area Sector Plan, development around the airport is intended to be complementary, not contradictory. The area west of the airport is slated to be a regional employment center for industries that want to locate next to an airport. To the south, airport-related businesses such as rental car

that the new airport brings. In addition, the Panama City–Bay County Airport and Industrial District (Airport Authority) has committed to designing, building, and operating America’s first green airport. As a result, the airport authority has developed detailed plans for wetlands mitigation, wildlife management, stormwater management, and wastewater treatment that greatly exceed minimum requirements set by Florida law.

For example, the airport authority has committed to follow Outstanding Florida Water standards for stormwater, the highest standard in the state of Florida, 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 monitoring of water quality. To put

this in perspective, stormwater treatment at the existing airport is minimal, a site where the existing runway is only 50 feet (15 m) from the bay.

The airport authority also set a goal of increasing wetlands function by enhancing the land in the mitigation area to well above the current wetlands function, and by providing mitigation far in advance of potential impacts. Direct wetlands impacts were calculated using a high-impact scenario, and will be mitigated using that data even if impacts turn out to be less than projected. As a result, environmental experts anticipate a 29 percent improvement in overall wetlands function.

Finally, the airport authority has committed to design and build a LEED-certified passenger terminal, which means it will exceed state and county requirements for

environmental performance. This commitment fits well with Governor Crist’s personal commitment—and executive order—directing that new buildings constructed for the state of Florida adopt LEED standards.

Planning for Regional Economic Development, Future Growth

Thus far, construction crews have completed clearing and grubbing 1,330 acres (538 ha) of the former industrial pine plantation for the initial development. Some 8,400 feet (2,561 m) of the primary runway is complete, with work on the final 1,600 feet (487 m) to begin soon for a total runway length of 10,000 feet (3,048 m). The installation of stormwater drains and culverts has begun and will continue throughout construction. As of April 2009, con-

struction is now approximately 54 percent complete and is proceeding on budget and ahead of schedule.

If future demand requires an extension of the 10,000-foot (3,048-m) primary runway, the site work prep being completed now will allow the lengthening to be completed quickly, with the potential available for a 12,000-foot (3,658-m) runway.

In addition, the airport has been designed to allow for construction of another 8,400-foot (2,561-m) runway parallel to the primary runway. The design of the new airport is intended to meet the region’s aviation needs for the next 50 to 100 years.

Once construction is complete, the FAA will put the new facility through a set of stringent tests and certify the new airport for operations. When all is certified, the old airport (PFN) will close one day as the new airport



In our palette, green is a primary color.

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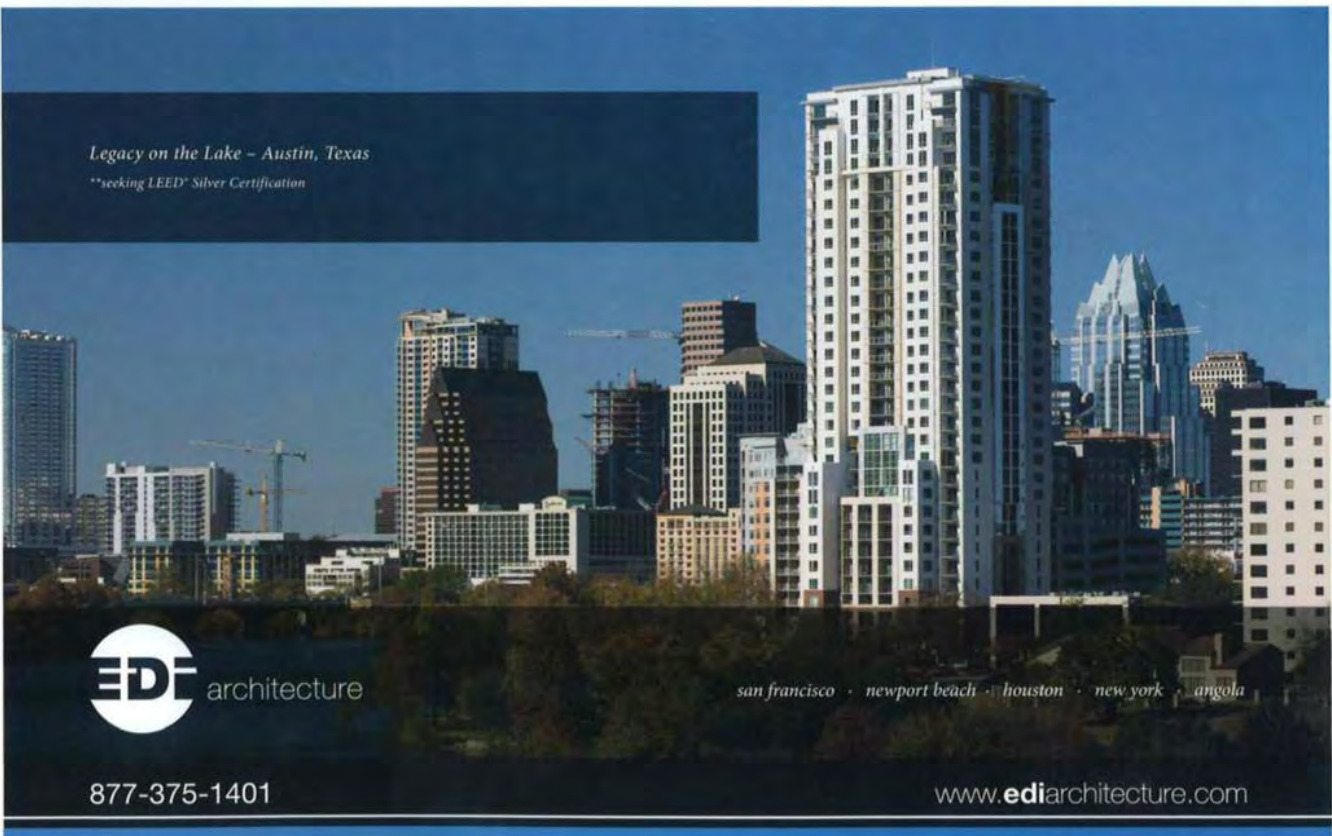
Interior rendering of planned terminal.

opens the following day. Under the current schedule, the opening date is set for Memorial Day 2010.

When the new airport opens, a new era of connectedness for the community is anticipated. Elsewhere, new airports have been important drivers of economic development, and that is expected to be the case in northwest Florida. Already, economic development organizations like Florida's Great Northwest, Enterprise Florida, and our local and regional Economic Development Alliances are working hard to ensure that the new jobs and improved air service arrive on schedule in 2010. **ULG**

Chairman and owner of Tannehill International Industries, Inc., **JOE TANNEHILL** is chairman of the Panama City-Bay County Airport and Industrial District as well as the Port of Panama City.

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