

Hainsey and Ardillo: airports must diversify to thrive, survive

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Airports must diversify, find a niche outside of the airline industry to ensure financial stability. And with the current shaky economy and high fuel prices, all contributing to a faltering airline industry that is still trying to recover from 9/11, that strategy has never been more critical for airports than now.

That is the message Mike Hainsey, A.A.E., and Nick Ardillo Jr. have been delivering of late. Hainsey is the current executive director of the Golden Triangle Regional Airport (GTRA), and Ardillo is his predecessor and partner with Ardillo McCullough & Taggart, LLC. The two men have put together a presentation on the topic and are currently offering it to airport executives around the state and nation.

Touch and go

The year 2003 should have been one of the worst in GTRA's history. The airport faced a potential crisis when Northwest Airlines gave 90 days' notice that it was discontinuing flights to the Lowndes County airport.

"We had been self-sufficient for years, and we didn't want to dip into our financial reserves," says Ardillo, who was serving as executive director at GTRA when Northwest pulled out. "That's why American Eurocopter was a must-win."

In late 2002, American Eurocopter announced it would locate a multi-million-dollar helicopter manufacturing facility at GTRA. That success offset the loss of Northwest. More over, it triggered a domino effect with

other manufacturers and defense/aerospace companies landing at GTRA such as SeverCorr, Aurora Flight Sciences and PACCAR.

The news at GTRA has been all positive since then. Both American Eurocopter and SeverCorr have expanded since coming to GTRA. And this has led to a more-with-less scenario at GTRA.

According to Hainsey, GTRA saw 13% fewer flights last year, but its passenger load was up more than 17%.

"We saw an 80% load factor here," Hainsey adds. "Our load factor wasn't that good when we had Northwest here."

Finding a fit

While manufacturing and defense/aerospace has been a savoir for GTRA, both Hainsey and Ardillo are quick to point out that those industries might not be a good fit for all airports.

For instance, SeverCorr's original construction plans called for a 250-foot cooling tower, which would have caused flight problems at GTRA. A compromise was subsequently found, but the two men say that is a good example of how nearby large manufacturing concerns can potentially limit an airport.

And, GTRA's success story includes more than manufacturing. Columbus Air Force Base is that military branch's busiest, and the base likes to use area airports to train its aviators. However, GTRA, which is only 12 air miles from the base, was not eligible because it had no control tower. Thanks to a coordinated effort by private and public leaders, the airport got funding for a control tower, and now the training flights are an important piece of GTRA's success.

The men say the key is to find something that works. That could be air cargo (Jackson-Evers International Airport has gone this route), a fly-in office park — even a golf course.

Flying together

Hainsey and Ardillo are quick to give credit for GTRA's success to others. Just as with the control tower, it took a large team composed of the public and private sectors to score the coups it has seen.

For example, there were 11 different funding sources for the first phase of American Eurocopter. And, it was the work of the Columbus-Lowndes Development Link and others that got the location of the SeverCorr plant certified as a megasite by the Tennessee Valley Authority, a key component in landing the steel mill.

The two men also say that workforce training has been a critical part of GTRA's "metamorphosis." They have nothing but praise for nearby East Mississippi Community College and its training programs.

"We don't want everybody to think we're taking all the credit," Hainsey says. "We certainly didn't do it alone."

Ardillo adds succinctly, "This is a team sport, for sure."

Hainsey and Ardillo are preparing to hit the road — or the air — with their Power Point presentation. The two men have already presented at a national gathering of the American Association of Airport Executives in Florida. They have also addressed local officials in McComb and Biloxi. At press time, they were preparing for a trip to Aspen, Colo., to present at a national conference hosted by the Boyd Group Inc., an aviation consulting, research and forecasting firm.