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To Build an Airport

Starting with a clean sheet of paper, how would you design an airport?

Building a completely new airport in the United States is not an easy thing to do, especially if that airport has a 10,000-ft (3,048-m) runway, a 5,000-to-6,000 ft (1,524-to-1,829 m) crosswind runway in the works and land reserved for an 8,400-ft (2,560-m) parallel runway. After detailing excellent reasons for building an airport, land and financing must be found, approvals must be obtained from local, regional, national and environmental authorities, and economic justifications must be locked in. Given all of this, it is not surprising that it wasn't until late May that the first new U.S. air carrier airport of the

21st century — the Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport (KEPC) — opened.

And what timing: Citizens of the region centered around Panama City, justifiably proud of the area's pristine white beaches, found themselves on the day the airport opened staring out into the Gulf of Mexico, watching for signs of oil drifting from the damaged well several hundred miles to the southwest. The oil may not land on this beautiful crescent of beaches, but the looming threat certainly didn't enhance the opening celebrations.

It would be wrong to say that the old Panama City Airport (KPFN) couldn't draw flies; there were several fixed base operators (FBOs) there and Delta Air Lines had a few services daily, most regional jets to Atlanta, and annual traffic was more than 300,000 people. But a major service improvement of the airport to attract larger aircraft, with the main runway of 6,308 ft (1,923 m), would have required a physical expansion, made difficult by housing on all sides of the airport not bounded by a bay and wetlands.

Community leaders saw an overwhelming need for a larger, 24-hour airport with greater utility and drawing power. The beaches are one traffic lure, but so, too, are the increasing number

of high-tech defense-focused industries opening up facilities in the region to take advantage of a cluster of U.S. military bases charged with developing new systems and technologies.

A third essential ingredient in the KEPC development stew is the involvement of the St. Joe Company, a firm with massive land holdings originally purchased for pennies on the acre for pine forests to feed its lumber and paper business. Some years ago the firm decided that a better business would be the development of its land so close to the water for housing and industry. Sensing that an airport could be the engine for a new level of development, St. Joe donated a 4,000-acre parcel for the airport and associated facilities; that includes fixed base operators — Sheltair Aviation Services is moving from KPFN — cargo facilities and a 125,000-sq-ft (11,612-sq-m) terminal capable of handling widebodies at some of its seven gates.

The result is an airport that is buffered from local communities by acres of pine forests, yet is a fairly short drive to the region's tourism, population and industry centers.

Taking in the vista with the eye of a "normal" person from the tall air traffic control tower, there isn't much to see, and that is exactly the appeal to pilots and operators. Miles and miles of flat





land, with approaches to Runway 16 or Runway 34 unobstructed as far as the eye can see in the bright, hazy Florida light.

While built with a standard runway end safety area (RESA), there really wasn't much to build aside from bulldozing and clearing acres of pine — with St. Joe involved, “harvesting” is probably a better term — and, *voilà!*, a wonderful RESA with a sandy soil base.

One of the airport's key rationales is improving the flow of tourists to a region that, until now, has been a well-kept secret to anyone living north of Atlanta. While Delta is transferring its largely Atlanta-hubbed service to the new airport, local community promoters sought a wider fetch, and so lured Southwest Airlines into a first-of-its-kind deal for the low-cost carrier that results in twice-a-day service from markets with a major Southwest presence — Baltimore/Washington, Orlando, Houston Hobby and Nashville airports. In exchange, the local authority will cover any Southwest losses on the service over a three-year period.

U.S. domestic operators don't need such a long runway that can, in fact, be easily stretched to 12,000 ft (3,658 m). International operations are the eventual goal for the new airport, developers readily admit.

However, the suite of initial airport equipment is not lavish. There is a single Category I instrument landing system/distance measuring equipment approach for Runway 16, with the lights and supporting systems required by regulation, but not much beyond that. There also are published global positioning system nonprecision approaches to both runways.

While weather in the region is generally benign, perhaps regular transatlantic operations might be more attracted to the airport by a higher level of system support to better assure regularity of operations.

It does, however, rain in Northwest Florida, often a lot over a short time. Asked about ponding water on the runway, a construction manager bristled, his irritation an artifact of past battles waged with environmentalists concerned about both the alteration of wetlands and the handling of runoff. The runway, he said, drains well and is grooved.

The air traffic control tower for the Class D airspace at KECP is a Level 1 contract facility using visual ground control guidance. The aircraft rescue and firefighting service is handled by an ARFF Index B facility.

The nearby military bases surround KECP with military operations

areas, and approach and departure control is handled by Tyndall Air Force Base.

Care was taken in laying out the airport to minimize the chance of runway incursions. The future crosswind runway, aligned 05/23 on the south end of the main runway, will be close to the FBO and general aviation ramp. The cargo facility is directly south of the tower, with the passenger terminal on the north side of the tower. If the parallel runway is built, it will be on the other side of the entrance roadway, so no runway crossing will be required to reach any of the runways.

One of the high-tech industries that fits well with local needs and workforce population is aircraft maintenance, repair and overhaul, and considerations have been given for building on the airport to support such activity. Cargo also is getting a lot of attention, with an effort being made to maximize KECP's multi-modal potential.

Airport backers, having invested \$318 million in the project, now have their fingers crossed that traffic will come and the oil will stay away. ➤