

## Lee County's Page Field soars

The News Press - Fort Myers, Fla.  
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Date: Sep 30, 2009  
Start Page: D.1  
Section: BUSINESS  
Text Word Count: 738

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### Document Text

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Fort Myers' Page Field General Aviation Airport had a productive summer, completing more than \$16 million in airfield improvements, including a new apron and a taxiway.

The project provided about 350 jobs at a time when the jobless rate soared to 13.5 percent in Lee.

Next, Lee County Port Authority will lobby state transportation officials to help pay for the next construction phase that includes a 22,600-square-foot terminal more than double the size of the existing, 20-year-old facility and a 24,000-square-foot multi-use hangar for lease.

On Tuesday, citizen advisers to county commissioners recommended engineering firm Hole Montes for the job of construction administrator for landside improvements at Page Field.

"We have a project that is truly shovel-ready," said authority director Bob Ball during a Friday interview at Page Field that included new general aviation director Barry Bratton. Ball hopes to break ground on a new round of construction sometime next year.

The upcoming improvements haven't been put out to bid yet, but could cost in the neighborhood of \$16 million to \$18 million, and could employ as many as 550. Altogether, it's the biggest investment at the airfield, which has undergone several extreme makeovers during its lifespan of more than 80 years.

The Federal Aviation Administration foots most of the bill for airfield improvements. But most of the building and site upgrades don't qualify for federal dollars. Instead, airport authority is turning to the state transportation department, hoping that agency will pay about half the costs. The rest of the funds will come from authority revenues gained through rents and fees. No property tax dollars are used for port authority operations or construction projects.

Airport leaders expect vigorous competition - and thrifty bids - from construction industries still reeling from national and regional economic downturns.

Since Southwest Florida International opened in 1983, Page Field has been a reliever airport, catering to non-commercial aviation. It handled more than 77,000 small aircraft take-offs and landings last year, freeing Southwest Florida International Airport to concentrate on commercial jetliners.

More than 200 aircraft, including private corporate jets, turboprops, twins, singles and helicopters make Page Field their home.

Page Field's tenant list includes such corporate aircraft tenants as Southern Machine & Steel, Schwab Ready Mix and Raymond Building Supply. Also based there are several aviation service businesses, flying clubs, retail shops at Page Field Commons north west of the airfield, state law enforcement agencies and Lee County Emergency Medical Services.

"I didn't know how nice this airport was until I started taking flying lessons," said Debra Stone-Ferrari, an artist who lives in Fort Myers. Now a licensed pilot and a member of the Sundowners flying club, she's practicing for her instrument rating. She likes the camaraderie at Page Field, which includes free sodas, hot dogs and cookies for pilots and their passengers at the aviation center on Fridays.

Ball wants to make Page Field even nicer for local users and out-of-towners. The new general aviation terminal will have more meeting space and a bigger aviation-themed gift shop. It also will boast amenities the current center lacks, including flight crew showers and lockers and a weather-briefing room.

Federal spending on general aviation airports has come under fire. A front-page report in USA Today Sept. 17 said millions of federal tax dollars have gone to construction projects at some general aviation airports that sit idle for hours a day.

Ball said it was an undeserved slap at general aviation, adding that Page Field is a reliever airport to Southwest Florida International. "Without (Page Field) you're mixing fast airplanes with slow airplanes. All that does is add delays to the national transportation system."

Beyond that benefit, Ball called Page Field an economic engine, its aviation-related businesses alone worth nearly \$51 million yearly for the region, according to 2005 data analyzed by consultant Riccondo & Associates.

The Riccondo study also noted airport tenants provide more than 230 jobs, and business generated by general aviation visitors create 350 jobs, and an additional 340 jobs in the community are supported by airport operations.

"This is more than rich kids with rich toys. This is commerce," Ball said, adding that when the economy turns around, "we're going to have a first-class general aviation terminal."

#### WORK AHEAD

Page Field improvements pending:

Terminal building, \$8 million (Shown above)

Site Improvements \$ 4.8 million

Fowler Street modifications, \$800,000

Fuel farm, \$1.4 million

Hangar, \$3.3 million

- Estimates from Lee County Port Authority

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#### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

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Airport leaders expect vigorous competition - and thrifty bids - from construction industries still reeling from national and regional economic downturns. Since Southwest Florida International opened in 1983, Page Field has been a reliever airport, catering to non-commercial aviation.

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