

Mankato airport will grow with new runway

Corporate jets, charter flights expected to expand

By Tim Krohn
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Kevin Baker can't help smiling as he looks out at the 35-year-old main runway at the Mankato Regional Airport and talks about what is soon to come.

"There's a lot of interest now that people know we're getting a new runway," said Baker, who manages the airport for the city.

The long-awaited runway, which will be constructed this summer and next, will vault the airport to a new level and open the possibility of charter, passenger and increased corporate business.

"It's exciting. It puts us parallel with Midwestern airports. We'll be on par with any of the regional airports," said Mankato City Manager Pat Hentges.

The airport, northeast of Mankato, has been getting steady upgrades for years, including a new terminal 10 years ago. But officials have been most anticipating construction of a new runway that will allow for heavier and larger jets to routinely use the facility.

Mankato Public Works Director George Rosati said the \$11 million dollar project will provide a 6,600-foot runway, replacing the current 5,400-foot runway.

Passenger service?

Baker said that with improvements in the flight industry and more small and regional carriers looking for good airports away from the congestion of the Twin Cities, Mankato should be in a good position to attract some passenger and charter services.

"I'd love to see regularly scheduled air service," Baker said. "But first I think you'll see someone who comes here once or twice a week."

He said the population in the area could easily support a couple of 30- to 50-passenger jets a few times a week.

"The city ultimately is hoping for a regional carrier coming in two or three times a day," Baker said.

He also envisions a charter service offering a jet flying out of Mankato for Las Vegas, Florida or some major hub once or twice a week.

Rosati said the airport supported a good passenger service business many years ago. "In the '70s, before deregulation, we had 2,900 deplanements a month in Mankato.

“When I first came to Mankato I flew in here from the Cities on a prop plane that held maybe 65 people and I left on a DC-9 that stopped here and Rochester and on to other airports,” Rosati said.

While deregulation led many of the big carriers to pull service from smaller cities, the real damage to airports like Mankato’s was 9/11, said Hentges.

With the airline industry economically battered, no one was looking at expanding services into smaller markets.

Baker said things are improving in the industry and he believes carriers are looking for new opportunities at regional airports. He said he’s talked with two regional carriers who are seriously looking at Mankato now that a new runway is on the way.

Operating during construction

At least 68 percent of the project will be funded by federal and state dollars, with the state’s share expected to increase, Rosati said. The city’s share will come from the local sales tax.

The airport will remain operational throughout the construction. The taxiway that runs parallel to the runway will be lengthened and will become the runway during reconstruction.

Part of the new main runway will be built this summer. In late fall, the main runway will be reopened for winter traffic. Next spring the taxiway will again be used as the runway while the rest of the construction is completed.

The runway will be 12-inches of concrete and 100 feet wide. “It will handle anything but a 747,” said Baker of the stronger and longer runway.

Rosati said having a heavier duty runway will not only allow for bigger jets but will allow them to be loaded more heavily with fuel and passengers or freight.

That means jets that want to make long-distance flights without refueling will be able to take-off from Mankato.

To make room for the extended runway and a required flat safety area at the end of the runway, the city has purchased land on the north end of the airport. A township road will be realigned.

Airport operations strong

Rosati said the new runway will compliment an airport that is already very strong.

“A lot of credit goes to Kevin (Baker). He’s just top notch. He maintains that place as if it was his own,” Rosati said.

Baker works for North Star Aviation, the private company the city contracts with to operate the airport. North Star has long been based at the airport and offers flight training, fuel sales and other services.

North Star also recently renewed its relationship with Minnesota State University and offers flight training for students.

North Star had offered MSU student flight training for years until MSU awarded the contract to a new company — Thunderbird Aviation — about six years ago. But the move was met with steep resistance by students and some faculty and a bitter dispute lingered for years.

Last fall, MSU again contracted with North Star to provide the student flight training.

Baker and North Star also handle the leasing of the 86 indoor hangar spaces at the airport. He said the hangars remain mostly full. Besides local companies with jets and prop planes stationed there, the airport also leases space to a few Twin Cities companies with jets because the cost of rent and related services here is cheaper. The pilots fly the jet to a Twin Cities airport to pick up and drop off executives then returns the jet to Mankato.

There are also a steady stream of corporate jets flying in and out of the airport, but not based there. Wal-Mart, Alltel, Pioneer Seeds and others routinely come in.

“I think people would be surprised at how many corporate jets are coming in here,” Baker said.

Rosati said the hangars are cash flowing. He said the long term plan is to likely build a larger commercial hangar, probably in partnership with some air carrier or freight carrier.

Baker said the demand for hangar space should stay strong, in part because more companies that couldn't justify buying a \$5 million or \$10 million jet can now buy a new line of smaller, lighter jets that sell for \$1 million to \$2 million.