Airport changes may aid growth

Southwest, new terminal called plus for business

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GREER — The addition of discount carrier, Southwest Airlines and a $99 million terminal expansion at Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport would help the Upstate sprout competitive wings in the battle to retain jobs and businesses, to lure new ones and to satisfy travelers, business folks say.

"It's hard to underestimate the importance of having a good logistics and transportation facility like the airport near Greer in terms of attracting business," said Doug Woodward, director of research for the University of South Carolina Darla Moore School of Business.

"For businesses, as this new facility becomes available, it's very important not just to the future of Greer but to the whole Upstate region," Woodward said.

GSP commissioners have hired consultants to design an $84 million terminal expansion to be completed in two years and expected to serve through 2030. A second expansion to cost $15 million would add a second baggage claim area and serve adequately through 2040. Southwest announced in May that it would begin service at GSP and Charleston next year.

Tom Przybojewski, president of Astra/CFX, a firm that plans on Monday to dedicate its $9 million tire and wheel assembly plant in Greer that will serve BMW's next

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generation of the X3 sports activity vehicle, said Southwest's availability means he can travel here more frequently from his Fort Lauderdale base.

"It's truly difficult to get to Greenville-Spartanburg now," he said. "You're always doing it with a connection," and too often commuter flights are canceled, he said. "They (Southwest) are a quality competitor, and I've never seen an area where they didn't help drive down prices and improve the service."

Competition is what it's all about in the game to keep businesses here and attract new ones, according to Ken Harper, chairman of the Greer-based Partnership for Tomorrow's board.

The partnership, which since 1998 has invested millions in the Greer economy, is made up of more than 70 businesses, plus local agencies, utilities and government. This year, it set a five-year goal to create 1,000 jobs and attract $125 million in capital investment.

"It's a competitive world out there," Harper said. "Folks are always looking to attract business away from Greenville-Spartanburg-Greer."

Forward-thinking terminal improvements will be important to keep airlines and attract new ones, resulting in competitive airfare, "which would certainly be an advantage to the Upstate market," he said. And more air traffic could result in spin-off local business.

Ingo Angermeier, president and CEO of Spartanburg Regional Healthcare System, said the innovative $10 million program that uses space at the healthcare system's medical campus in Greer to research and test patient room and operating room equipment in collaboration with industry, Clemson University and others, was sited near the airport, which he would be happy to see provide more service.

The unique program draws visitors from across the United States and from Canada, he said.

"Having that airport proximity really opens that lab to the rest of the world, and we're thrilled," he said.