Pickens needs more space for planes



JOHN C. STEVENSON / Staff

A Citation Sovereign taxies onto the runway Tuesday at Pickens County Airport.

Airport expansion can now take off with grant monies

Waiting list more than twice as long as number of available hangars

By John C. Stevenson
STAFF WRITER
jstevens@greenvillenews.com

PICKENS — Most people enter Pickens County by routes such as State 11 or U.S. 123. But others come from a different direction — up.

The Pickens County airport is the gateway for travelers who fly in, rather than drive in. They fly in to explore business opportunities in the county, or they own some of the county's premium residential real estate, and the personal plane is their way of commuting.

A new federal grant for land acquisition at the airport will help the county keep up with the growing demand for airport services, according to Chap Hurst, county administrator.

"That frees us up to look at other land around the airport," Hurst said of the federal Transportation Department grant for $133,920. "We need some additional space for additional hangars and protection on the (northern) side of the airport."

Hurst said the money is earmarked to pay for an 8.5-acre tract, which the county purchased within the past month. He said the property, which is located at the end of the airport runways, was a problem because the vegetation was obstructing the runways.



SUZIE RIDDLE / Staff

Now the county can clear the property and maintain it, and eventually use it for expansion, according to Hurst.

Expansion can't come too soon for Skeets Cooper, airport director. Construction of 22, T-shaped hangars was completed in September of 2009, he said, and those are currently 100 percent occupied with "more on the waiting list than we have hangars to occupy right now."

"We have 22 T-hangars rented right now, and at last count we had 40-something people on the waiting list," he said.

There will be some relief next year, when the county plans to construct several box-style hangars, Cooper said.

Hurst said the airport needs 15-20 more hangars, but currently doesn't have the land on which to construct them.

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Regardless of future expansion, the purchase of the 8.5-acre tract is important now, Cooper said, because clearing the property will make the airport safer, especially for lower approaches.

"It allows aircraft to come in here during bad weather — it will allow pilots to come down to lower minimums, and that makes the airport more useful in bad weather," he said.

In addition to the demand for hangars, there's other evidence that business is up at the airport, especially in the non-business traffic, Cooper said. He confirmed that, during the economic downturn, airport traffic decreased.

"Some of our clients that would normally come down to come to their lake homes two or three times a month cut back to two or three times a year," he said. "But it seems to be improving — slowly, but it's improving."

Cooper said the Upstate is a "very attractive area for people to come and visit, and come live when they retire."

Ray Farley, executive director of the county's economic-development arm, Alliance Pickens, said those residents are a valuable part of the area's continuing economic development.

"The airport provides a tool that makes our area that much more desirable to retirees who have planes," Farley said. "When they invest here, it's good for the local tax base. They deposit their money in local banks and they spend their disposable income here."