Airport planning major expansion



OWEN RILEY JR. / Staff

Plans to renovate the Greenville-Spartanburg airport include moving these escalators to separate people using them from passengers standing in lines at the ticket counters.

$99 million project would transform terminal for growth, Southwest

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Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport commissioners are planning to spend $99 million to renovate and expand the 48-year-old terminal, but their chairman, textile magnate Roger Milliken, has one relatively small request — a model of the project he can pick up and hold in his hands.

• Born 12 years after the Wright brothers' first flight, the 94-year-old Milliken trusts technology to a point, but when it comes to GSP, the airport commission's only chairman wants something he can actually touch and asked designers for a model as well as their 3-D computer designs.

The project comes as GSP readies for the arrival of Southwest Airlines, the discount carrier that is expected to attract travelers who now drive to Charlotte or Atlanta.

Consultants have been given the go-ahead to continue design work for the expansion and renovation of the terminal. Its core portion was built in 1962.

"This is an enormous amount of money," Milliken said, adding a model would help commissioners visualize the plan. Milliken, who was responsible with the late Greenville businessman Charlie Daniel for getting the airport constructed, has been involved in every change at GSP.

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If approved, the demolition and reconstruction of the terminal's core is expected to improve traffic flow inside the building, centralize ticketing and screening, connect the two concourses and put most concessions behind security.

The building also would be made more "green" with harvested rainwater, solar energy, use of daylight and glass walls for scenic views. The construction, while challenging, can be done without closing the terminal, said Dave Edwards, the airport's executive director.

While GSP is preparing for the arrival of a new carrier, "there are several components we need regardless of Southwest," Edwards said.

Security issues that arose after 9/11 have required additional space for equipment and personnel. The ticketing area has some problems. Some of these issues were addressed in the 2003 airport master plan.

But "this is in part a response to the simulation of passenger traffic we anticipate from Southwest's arrival," he said. "Southwest probably advances the time frame."

The expansion and plans for 30 years into the future sends a powerful signal: "We're committed to the region and to the future. We're going to be around. You ain't seen nothing yet,'" said Bruce Yandle, dean emeritus of Clemson University's College of Business and Behavioral Science.

"They're making a real bet with real money," he said. "In the context of Southwest coming, it's important support for corporate headquarters for the region and the nation."

Mark Vitner, senior economist with Wells Fargo Securities, said, "I think Greenville's economy has grown to the point that the availability of direct air service is more important to attracting and retaining business."

This project "does make some sense," Vitner said. "Greenville's economy has been growing solidly," and long-range forecasts predict continued growth.

Design work is expected to take about a year and construction another two years.

The first phase of construction is estimated at $84 million and would provide the capacity needed through 2030, said Steve Harrell of the HS&R design and planning firm.

A second phase, which would primarily be expanding the first floor to the north to add a second baggage claim area, would cost about $15 million and provide capacity needed through 2040, when the consultants anticipate 2 million passengers would depart from the terminal annually.

Edwards said he believes he can obtain about $30 million in grants from the Federal Aviation Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Transportation Security Administration.

He would like to take the rest from the airport's reserve funds, which now total about $79 million, although some of that is committed to other projects. He would rather not fund the project through bonds or passenger fees. He also said the project could be built in smaller increments.

He told commissioners he would have additional cost details on the various components of the renovation quickly.

The airport alsowill need more parking. With the arrival of Southwest, current parking options are adequate for about the next five years and then more lots and perhaps a garage will be needed.

"If Southwest picks up a high proportion of business travelers, which we expect, we might want to do the garage first. If leisure traffic picks up, the economy lot might come first," Edwards said.

Plans also call for centralizing the first-floor ticketing area, which is now split by escalators and stairs to the second floor. Escalators, elevators and stairs would be moved toward the side of the terminal to keep people using them away from lines at the ticket counters.

The baggage screening area would be expanded and improved for automatic screening rather than the hand wand scanning now used.

The baggage claims area would stay where it is, but the area where the bags are moved from the plane to the carousels would be expanded. The second phase would include another baggage claims area on the north end of the terminal.

Security screening, which would be on the third floor, would be consolidated in one area with the two concourses connected. The airport now has 13 gates but could expand that to 18 gates. Most concessions, including a full-service restaurant, would be behind the security checkpoint.

Andrew Weddig, senior vice president of Unison Consulting and a member of the HS&R team, said "GSP is behind the curve" when it comes to maximizing concessions revenues.

GSP now nets $3.16 from food and beverages and $1.99 from retail sales for each departing passenger — about 50 cents less than the average airport. If most concessions are behind a security checkpoint, GSP could expect to get more, he said.

Plans are to concentrate concessions behind the checkpoint with some at the end of either concourse, he said. If passengers can see their departure gates, they are more likely to stop at concessions.

"It's all about improving the passenger experience," he said. "It's also about improving non-aviation revenue."