Oconee Airport about to spread its wings

Runway extension, other plans are coming to fruition for property with checkered past

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SENECA — Belo Horizonte is a long way from Oconee County, but that doesn't stop Airport Director Kevin Short from using the Brazilian city's airport as an example of what his airport could strive to become.

Sitting in front of a computer at the airport's terminal, Short scrolled through aerial photos of the majestic Belo Horizonte (Portuguese for Beautiful Horizon) runway on top of a mountain symmetrically carved in cascading steps down its sides. Just as Oconee's airport, Belo Horizonte's runway is carved out on a high ridge. Pilots greatly prefer to descend into an approach at an airport on a hill with its clear visibility over one in a valley that is susceptible to fog.

It appears that Short's big plans for the little airport are quickly coming to fruition.

Assistant Administrator Kendra Brown informed the Oconee County Council this week that a $2.6 million grant from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is already in hand. The money will be used to complete con-

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Jessica Nelms/Staff

Casey Nalley works on one of the aircraft inside an overcrowded hangar, on Friday.

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struction of a 600-foot runway extension on runway 25. When completed, Oconee's airport will finally have a coveted 5,000-foot runway for the first time since it was built in 1962.

Jay Talbert, a principal with Talbert & Bright Inc., the county's airport consultant, expects business to boom once the word spreads that the local airport has a 5,000-foot runway. He said the upgraded facility would attract companies always looking for new places to taxi their corporate jets.

On Friday, Talbert said his firm has received information that final permits from the state Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) and the US Army Corps of Engineers should become available in 10 days. These permits would allow the runway extension project to begin.

To meet what is expected to be higher demand for T-hangars and corporate T-hangars once the runway project is completed, county officials continue to negotiate with a private property owner for 11.23 acres located south of the airport's runway on Airport Road.

The property has somewhat of a checkered past, having been seized by authorities after a drug raid against a previous owner. According to county property records, Richard Sepler of Miami, Fla., currently owns the land.

Talbert calls the land prime real estate and an important component of the airport's future development. Short said acquisition of the land is important given that property north of the taxiway is part of the Clemson forest.

"That is forever off limits," Short said.

County Attorney Tom Martin said eminent domain could be used to obtain the property, which falls under the category of being for public use because it would be part of the county airport operations. Martin said many factors have to be taken into account before going the eminent domain route, however.

Among the things to consider are the need for the property, the need for the public use it will serve, the impact on private property rights, the public relations and public image aspects of using eminent domain, the cost of litigation and the likelihood of a sympathetic jury award of damages compared to the cost of an outright purchase, according to Martin.

"I hope, and assume until proven otherwise, that it will be amicable, cordial and otherwise mutually productive," he said.

Aside from its high and clear landing path for pilots, Talbert said the county airport has a bright future because of its excellent location with proximity to Seneca and Clemson.

"Many small airports, for the sake of less expensive property, are located out of the way," Talbert said. "Oconee's is a good location."