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Jessica Nelms/Staff

Pee Dee Aviation members load up their bags on a plane before taking off from the Oconee County Regional Airport on Tuesday afternoon. The local airport is seeking \$22.5 million in federal grants over the next five years for improvements.

Small airport thinks big

Regional hub requests \$22.5 million in grants

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SENECA — For a small operation, the Oconee County Regional Airport has benefited from big bucks dished out by the federal government.

During the past nine years, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has poured about \$5.7 million into the little local airport that's been around for almost 50 years.

In 2008 alone, the FAA

awarded \$3.1 million in grants through the Airport Improvement Program (AIP) for Oconee Regional Airport, easily exceeding the almost \$2.6 million handed out from 2000-2007.

Through the years, the funds have been used for such things as studies and surveys to extend and widen runways, construct taxiways, install runway lighting and weather reporting capabilities, improve runway safety and even pay for an

update of the Airport Master Plan in 2005.

Over the same period, Pickens County Airport near Liberty has received less funds — about \$3 million — but the federal money is helping put up a new terminal building, which is currently under construction.

Oconee airport Director Kevin Short is hoping the FAA will be as generous with its grants in the future as it has in the past.

Short recently released the airport's five-year FAA capital funding request for AIP eligible projects that totals about \$22.5 million.

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"Every fall we get a letter from the FAA to update our wish list of projects through the AIP," Short said. "It's a request for funding. The list is boiled down and prioritized."

The \$2.4 million requested for fiscal year 2009-10, which begins Oct. 1, would allow, among other projects, land acquisition and relocation assistance for extension of runway seven, terminal area land acquisition (11.23 acres), taxiway improvements and adding perimeter fencing along the northern property boundary.

The most ambitious requests are almost \$6.4 million in fiscal 2010-11 and \$7.2 million in fiscal 2013-14. The money in 2010-11 would fund the relocation of state Highway 394 and the Phase 1 relocation of Shiloh Road and Mt. Nebo Church Road, as well as the construction of 10 new GT-hangars and associated taxiways and lanes.

The request in 2013-14 would pay for grading and extension of runways and other improvements.

Whether those funds materialize given the weak economy and budget constraints is another matter.

"Who knows what's going to happen," Short said. "We've been very fortunate. We've done our due diligence and have been very proactive."

Skeets Cooper, director of the Pickens County Airport, said that in fiscal 2009-10, he's requesting about \$1.7 million to fund land acquisition, tree clearance for approaches and taxiway improvements.

Opened since 1969, the Pickens County Airport has progressed at a slower rate than other general aviation airports, Cooper admitted.

"We've been behind," Cooper said. "We've basically not had stuff change, but things are improving. The FAA has been very helpful when you meet their guidelines."

Cooper said future plans call for the Pickens County Airport to add 500 to 1,000 feet to its present 5,000-foot runway.

Short said Oconee is waiting for a federal Environmental Protection Agency permit that would allow the addition of 600 feet to its current 4,400 feet.

"The plan has always been to have 5,500 feet of runway," Short said. "To do that properties need to be acquired and roads relocated."

Oconee Regional Airport is based four miles away from Clemson University, just off Shiloh Road. The county-operated airport generates \$6.3 million to the local economy, including 107 jobs and \$2.7 million in payroll.

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