Aurora Airport summit offers insight

23 September 2015

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Oregon Aviation Industries, a membership organization focused on economic development for the 400-plus aviation-related businesses, held its fourth-annual summit at the Aurora State Airport Sept. 15, and much of the talk centered about the future of economic development around regional airports.

They also celebrated the soon-to-be-opened $3.2 million air traffic control tower erected at the Aurora State Airport, the first of its kind in Oregon, and a new law signed by Gov. Kate Brown that will generate revenue for airports.

House Bill 2075 increases aircraft fuel taxes by 4 cents per gallon and it is expected to generate about $8.5 million annually in additional revenue for regional airports. Five aviation programs across the state would receive tax proceeds to help meet matching funds of Federal Aviation Administration airport improvement grants, pay for improvements at airports not eligible for FAA funding, help finance statewide economic development around airports, provide an allocation for emergency management, and help to develop small community air service.

The State of Oregon owns 32 regional airports, all of which are in varying states of disrepair. Revenue generated by the fuel tax is supposed to help many of these airports make the improvements needed to increase air traffic and the ability of aviation companies located at those airports to generate new business.

A panel of state legislators that included Sen. Betsy Johnson (D-Scappoose), Sen. Fred Girod (R-Stayton), Sen. Ted Ferrioli (R-John Day) and Rep. Julie Parrish (R-Tualatin/West Linn) discussed the economic viability of Oregon's regional airports and the economic development possibilities for the regions where they are located.

"These are no longer just places where planes take off and land anymore," Johnson said. "The economic opportunities at regional airports is extraordinary. All of us have an obligation to make sure that integrity remains within the system. (These airports are) home to some of the most advanced research and development found in the state."

Girod said the biggest challenge facing regional airports today is getting sewer and water utilities extended from nearby municipalities. "If we could get that to happen the job growth here (at Aurora State Airport) could be tremendous," he said.

Parrish said regional airports not only provide economic stimulus, they also provide well-paying, blue-collar jobs for people that do not want to pursue a traditional college education.

"This is an opportunity for kids who are not on a college path," Parrish said. "We need to open doors for them by partnering with community colleges to make sure people can get the training they need to get into those family-wage jobs."

Ferrioli said Oregon is on the bubble in terms of the unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), otherwise known as drones, industry taking off.

"There are more things on the drawing board here than anywhere else in the country," Ferrioli said. "Obviously, there is something about rural Oregon that the federal government likes. This is an opportunity that if we let go by our children will curse our names."

Aurora State Airport is the state's third-busiest, and one of only 84 general aviation airports in the nation the FAA designated as "nationally significant," according to information from the Wilsonville Area Chamber of Commerce. In 2014, the airport saw 94,000 operations equaling 117,675 "general aviation visitors." Aurora State Airport employs 1,200 people and another 274 jobs off airport property. The 2007 Oregon Aviation Plan, the most recent information available, found that the airport had a direct economic impact of $35 million in family wages and $75.08 million in business sales. Total spending by aviation visitors to the region was $8.48 million.

"Those numbers have definitely increased since (2007)," Aurora Aviation President Bruce Bennett told the Herald.