

Charter jet business adds services at Allegheny County Airport

Airport Authority considers airport expansion

BY JENNIFER CURRY

A major tenant at the Allegheny County Airport is planning an expansion that could be a precursor to a larger growth plan at the West Mifflin airport.

Private jet firm Voyager Jet Center has entered into a month-to-month lease agreement for a new hangar, 10,000 square feet of tie-down ramp space and a room in the Allegheny County Airport's administration terminal building that will be used for office space.

Voyager currently leases parts of two other hangars, but the new hangar, which includes more ramp space than the other hangars, will be the first one that the firm will lease exclusively. In addition, Voyager is considering construction of more permanent facilities at the airport in the near future and is in the process of negotiating with Corporate Air Management Inc., a fixed base operator at the county airport, regarding additional development opportunities at the facility.

Joann Jenny, an Airport Authority spokeswoman, added that the authority is currently overseeing an environmental assessment to determine if additional land can be cleared so that the airport can be expanded.

Possible development scenarios include the addition of several new hangars, aviation-related buildings and an aircraft parking apron to be located in an area that is being converted from a runway to a taxiway. According to Michael Dolan, vice president of government relations at Voyager, the Allegheny County Airport has seen an increase in traffic and growth in recent years and is trying to accommodate it.

Additional details regarding the airport's possible expansion were not immediately available.

Voyager jet's expansion is part of its plan to graduate from an aircraft management firm to become a fixed base operator, or FBO. Traditionally, a fixed base operator provides a range of services such as refueling, parking, ground services and aircraft maintenance, among others.

According to Mr. Dolan, Voyager decided to



Photo by Joe Wojcik

ROLLING ALONG: Voyager Jet Center mechanic Josh Skerbitz moves a company jet at Allegheny County Airport, where the company plans to expand its services.

become an FBO because it feels the market is currently underserved and because of the growth that Voyager has seen in recent years.

In the past year, Voyager has added two airplanes to its fleet and six more employees. Since its founding in 1999, annual revenue has jumped from \$200,000 to \$12 million. The company currently flies seven planes, has 26 employees and provides executive aircraft management and charter services.

As part of its expansion plans, Voyager is looking to build a permanent facility to provide additional space. The company is working on plans for that space, but did not release specific details. Mr. Dolan said the whole process should take just a matter of months to complete.

In order to officially be considered an FBO, Voyager Jet still has a number of details to sort out, including receiving approval from the Federal Aviation Administration. The company has signed a contract with a Houston-based fuel provider, Airfuel International, and is beginning to install new fuel systems.

There is currently only one FBO at the Allegheny County Airport: Corporate Air Management Inc. A spokesperson for Corporate Air declined comment regarding Voyager's expansion.

"It is the best thing for the county and the airport and the citizens of Allegheny County to grow and

create more business opportunities, Mr. Dolan said.

Others agree that increased competition will be good for the airport and community.

"We only think that more operators and facilities out there will increase development in the West Mifflin area," Ms. Jenny said.

Rock Ferrone, president of the West Deer-based Rock Airport of Pittsburgh LLC, a general aviation airport that is part of Mr. Ferrone's Rockpointe Business Airpark and is currently being expanded to allow for the use of multi-engine aircraft and corporate jets, also said Voyager's transition to an FBO will be good for the Allegheny County Airport, which he believes is big enough to sustain two such operators.

"I think there's been a void there for quite some time," Mr. Ferrone said. "That type of competition is healthy for an airstrip ... It is not healthy to have an exclusive FBO operation."

He said that in addition to spurring competition, an additional FBO will help provide additional aircraft services at the county airport.

"The fact is that a good general aviation facility just promotes additional general aviation," Mr. Ferrone said. "A good aviation infrastructure is good for all parties."

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