

Reworked Austin-area airport opens to corporate, private flights

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After more than three years of construction and a \$33 million makeover, the former Bird's Nest Airport celebrated its official reopening Wednesday as the Austin Executive Airport.

More than 400 people attended festivities at the airport, which is on 585 acres in Pflugerville.

Officials say that the airport will fill a void in the region, which has had a shortage of general aviation airport facilities since the late 1990s, when the former Robert Mueller Municipal Airport in East Austin and the original Austin Executive Airport, north of the city, closed.

Austin has been one of the nation's largest cities without a general aviation reliever airport, Austin Executive Airport officials say.

The new airport now has a 27,000-square-foot terminal; a runway that is 6,025 feet long by 100 feet wide; hangars; a fuel farm; a lounge and office space for pilots; and a conference room.

Work on the expansion started in 2008.

Though the new runway could accommodate aircraft as big as a Boeing 737, that won't be the primary market.

Rather, the airport will serve corporate and private aircraft, said Andrew Perry, the airport's executive director.

"We feel that we've created a premier airport for the greater Austin area," Perry said.

He said traffic has ranged from 10 to 80 flights a day since the new airport opened unofficially May 11.

Already, all hangar space is filled with more than 40 private and corporate planes, "and we're already going to have to look to expand," Perry said.

The man and money behind the airport is Ron Henriksen, a former corporate pilot who made his fortune in the telecommunications industry.

Henriksen also owns the Houston Executive Airport, which opened in 2007 in the Katy/Brookshire area west of Houston.

"For more than a decade, the state of Texas has been trying to build an airport in the Austin area," Henriksen said. "There is no doubt that it will be a draw for further economic growth, and will improve aviation infrastructure throughout the state."

Perry said Austin-Bergstrom International Airport's main focus is commercial and cargo aircraft and that it can get congested.

Now, corporate and private aircraft pilots will have another alternative close to downtown and 15 minutes from the Capitol, Perry said.

The new airport also is about 16 miles from the Formula One racetrack under construction in eastern Travis County. The first race, tentatively scheduled for June 2012, is expected to attracting thousands of fans, including many who might arrive by private or corporate planes.

After Bergstrom opened in 1999, "we lost a lot of our general aviation services," said Dave Porter, senior vice president for economic development at the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce. "It's great to have additional general aviation services available in the Austin area."

At the end of its first year, airport officials project the new facility will be serving 100 aircraft a day, growing to 575 a day within 10 years. The facility will generate both sales and property tax revenue.

"The facility will surely have a huge positive economic impact," said Pete Dwyer, a developer with real estate interests in the area.

In nearby Bastrop County, developer Jim Carpenter hopes to build another general aviation airport, but that project has encountered some headwinds, including opposition from some residents.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin

New airport for private pilots



Linda Scott AMERICAN-STATESMAN

