



## **New Airport... Key to Economic Development**

By Tom Neubauer

PANAMA CITY, FL - I am convinced that the West Bay Sector Plan and the new Bay County-Panama City International Airport will mark the beginning of an unprecedented era of job creation and economic development for Bay County. Motivated by a recent News Herald editorial calling for more public information on the merits of a new airport, the Bay County Economic Development Alliance (EDA) led a group of civic leaders, government officials, and journalists on a fact-finding mission to the Southwest Florida International Airport in Ft. Myers, Florida. Studying the history, development plans, and economic impact of their relatively new airport facility led me to conclude that the relocation of the Bay County-Panama City Airport is too great of an opportunity for Bay County to pass up.

While there are a number of airport success stories in the southeast U.S., several factors led us to conclude that the Ft. Myers model provides a good case study for comparison to Bay County. Consider some of these factors:

- Ft. Myers relocated their airport in the mid-80's following a period during the 1970's where their growth patterns, demographics, and local economy were very similar to Northwest Florida today.
- The Southwest Florida region was extremely "transportation poor." One U.S. highway served as the primary road link, and air service was extremely limited.
- The old airport in Ft. Myers, Page Field, had a 6,400 ft. runway (the same as our existing airport), and was physically constrained from expansion by a major highway on one end of the runway and residential development on the other.
- Air service at Page Field during the 70's and early 80's was also very limited, with the two existing carriers citing problems with the runway length.
- The community leaders of Ft. Myers faced extremely difficult and vocal opponents to relocating the airport. The arguments against their project are familiar to us in Bay County: It was considered a waste of federal and state tax dollars, the site was too far out of town, and the passenger traffic simply wasn't sufficient cause to relocate the airport.

With this background in mind, our delegation sought to hear first hand from the airport management team and the local economic development agency whether or not the airport relocation project proved to be a success. In particular, did it lead to improved air service and did it lead to greater economic development in the region?

The short answer to our questions was, yes, air service greatly improved, and yes, the local economy blossomed into a diversified mix of quality tourism and technology

business growth. Let me share a few other interesting observations made by our delegation during this trip.

- The decision to relocate the airport from Page Field was made in 1973, the same year a new passenger terminal was built at Page Field.
- Ten years later, in 1983, commercial operations ceased at Page Field and the new airport opened. The terminal was over-capacity on the day it opened.
- In the first 17 years of service, passenger traffic through the new airport quadrupled. Passenger volume reached 3 million in 1988, seven years ahead of the airport planner's schedule.
- In 1990, seven years after opening the original terminal, the Port Authority decided to construct a new mid-field terminal and began acquiring property from over 50 property owners adjacent to the airport.
- Acquiring additional property for expansion was difficult due to speculation by land investors and the eventual need to pursue acquisitions through a condemnation process. After 13 years of property acquisition, the Port Authority began constructing the new mid-field terminal at a cost of over \$400 million in 2003. Approximately 30% of this cost is estimated to be a result of the land acquisition program.
- Through 2002, the Southwest Florida International Airport is responsible for creating 44,000 permanent jobs and adding over \$2 Billion to the local economy.
- Ft. Myers is now served by 21 different airlines, a significant change from the two airlines serving the area during the 1970's.
- Relocating the airport to its present location prompted a major Florida company, the Westinghouse Corporation, to purchase 10,000 acres of undeveloped land north of the airport. Today, this property is an intricate network of master planned industrial, office, commercial, golf, and residential communities. Many in our delegation agreed that this development could be a model for the future of our West Bay Sector Plan within the next twenty years.

The Ft. Myers visit has provided compelling evidence that relocating our airport is the right thing to do. I admire the community leaders who shared a vision and carried it forward in Fort Myers 20 years ago, which has led to the progressive growth and development of the entire Southwest Florida region. Their community faced many environmental, political, and financial difficulties in both relocating their airport and in building a new mid-field terminal. They remained committed to the task, confident that the fruits of their efforts would be realized 15 to 20 years later.

In contrast to the decision of Ft. Myers to take charge of their economic future in 1988 and eventually embark on an expensive land-acquisition program, Bay County has a gift of 4,000 acres for the airport, an additional 10,000 acres for environmental mitigation and a plan to permanently protect the West Bay watershed. The decision to provide a key component for the economic future of our community was clearly the right choice. Of course, it's easy to understand why any neighboring community who will someday have to compete with Bay County for air freight, aircraft maintenance, manufacturing and other desirable industry, might not be entirely supportive of our efforts. Clearly our area

will experience significant growth with or without thoughtful long-term planning. If you think this project is insignificant to the future of our economy.... think again. We have much to learn from other communities, and we have an opportunity to do this right, the first time.