

## May 3, 2009 - Local Leaders Attempt to Clear Air on Johnstown Airport

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Local leaders attempt to clear air on Johnstown airport

By RANDY GRIFFITH

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— It's easy to throw around big numbers when talking about the federal tax dollars that fly into John Murtha Johnstown-Cambria County Airport.

But calling it waste because commercial ridership has dipped misses the bigger picture, local airport and business leaders say. Economic development, job creation and military programs rely on the airport's success.

A Washington Post article published April 19 called it a "testament to (U.S. Rep. John) Murtha's ability to tap streams of federal money."

The story brought a parade of other reporters to the local tarmac chasing the same story on Johnstown's "little-used" airport.

"What the (national) media didn't understand, a lot of that money was for the military," airport authority member and businessman Bill Polacek said.

Johnstown also is different because of its limited highway access, Johnstown Area Regional Industries President Linda Thomson said.

"We have to be connected to the world to be competitive in the global economy," Thomson said. "The airport has been extremely important since we don't have an interstate highway. It is one of the important assets business leaders want."

Federal money at the airport helps military and business, Polacek said.

"It benefited the airport, of course, but military helps commerce," he said. "That's where the Johnstown airport is unique. There are 45,000 takeoffs a year, including helicopters."

The National Guard, Army Reserve and Marines all have units at the airport. They account for about 420 full-time employees and 610 part-time Guard and Reserve members. The Army and Air National Guard units pump \$42.9 million a year into the local economy, spokesman Lt. Col. Christopher Cleaver said.

The airport is a vital part of the Guard's strategic deployment plans, Cleaver said. Johnstown's per-capita rates for citizen soldiers deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan are among the highest in the nation.

"In today's climate of warfare, it's extremely prudent to be able to move fast," Cleaver said. "We have a commitment to mobilize in 96 hours. It's a great advantage to have a runway at your doorstep to quickly move to anywhere in the world."

In addition, the Johnstown location is convenient, while free of big-city traffic for Guard members in much of western Pennsylvania.

"There is a mix of aircraft there," Cleaver said.

"It's a tremendous training opportunity for aviators."

A \$17.8 million runway upgrade being wrapped up this year has two military objectives. The runway will become a backup for larger Guard and Reserve aviation units in Pittsburgh and other cities, and it is connected to a plan to build climate-controlled warehouses for storing tanks and other attack vehicles for rapid deployment.

Although another Post article bashed the improvement because only one warehouse has been completed because of soil issues, another Guard spokesman said the runway upgrade will improve homeland security ability.

“What makes Johnstown important to us — if there were an issue in Pittsburgh, we could relocate to Johnstown quickly,” Lt. Col. Don Accamando said from the 171st Air Refueling Wing in Pittsburgh.

The Pittsburgh command directs the 258th Air Traffic Control Squadron at Johnstown and could operate out of the Airport Road facility.

“Who knows what could happen here in Pittsburgh,” Accamando said, recalling Hurricane Katrina and the Sept. 11 attacks. “It would be a turnkey operation to set up there. We couldn’t do that at a civilian airport in an emergency. We could still support operations.”

Airport leaders are working on two fronts to make the airport more financially viable. The economic development committee has property around the airport for businesses looking for runway access. The marketing committee is in the middle of a “Fly Johnstown” campaign to build passenger numbers.

“We are already in talks with companies interested in locating at the airport,” Polacek said, noting an aircraft parts manufacturer wants to set up an assembly shop.

JARI is working with the airport authority on an industrial park concept.

“We see the airport as an economic development tool and a vital community asset to market the region,” Thomson said.

The authority also is courting express freight companies looking for a major hub outside of already-congested air space. The runway upgrade makes that possible in Johnstown.

A major tenant and maybe some upgraded hangars would make a big difference, authority Chairman Raymond Porsch said during a recent meeting.

"We have everything else in place for this thing to go," Porsch said. "For this airport to be solvent, we only need one or two big deals."

Ridership is a problem, leaders admit, but some of Johnstown's trouble can be traced to a monthlong shutdown of commercial flights last year during the runway project.

"Last year was a big hit," Polacek said. "That's where we really lost ridership. So far this year, it's up."

The Federal Aviation Administration pays Colgan Air about \$1.1 million a year to operate three daily United Airways Express flights to Washington's Dulles International airport. Last year that worked out to about \$115 a passenger under the federal Essential Air Service subsidy program, or slightly above the 2006 average of \$98 per passenger for all 110 airports receiving funding.

Colgan gets another \$1.6 million for the Altoona-Blair County Airport stop on each of the Johnstown flights. That was about \$160 a passenger.

In 2006, the often-controversial Essential Air Service subsidies ranged from \$13 per passenger in Escanaba, Mich., and Sheridan, Wyo., to \$677 in Brooking, S.D., the Government Accountability Office reported.